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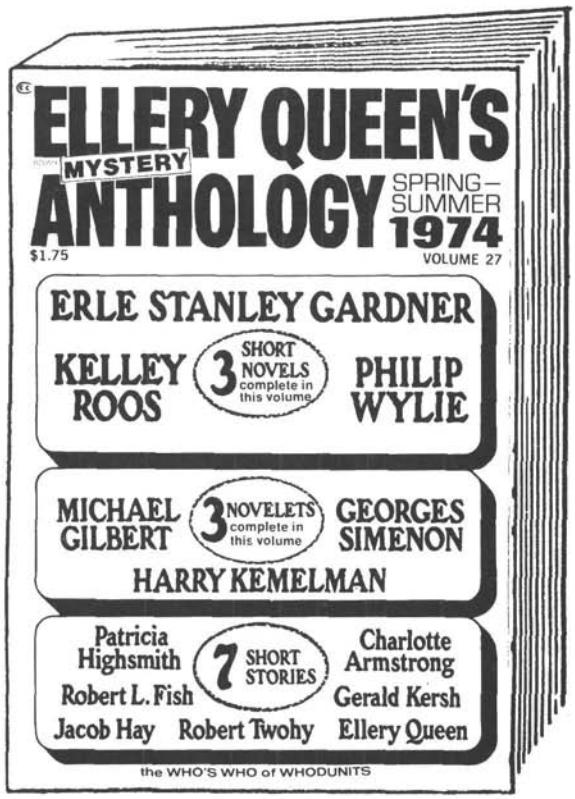

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ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

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a NEW Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

Another account of a monthly meeting of the Black Widowers Club, and this time it is Thomas Trumbull, the code expert, who brings the special guest-and-grillee. The g-and-g is Trumbull's superior in the Federal government, and he confronts the club members with as baffling a postprandial problem as the Black Widowers have ever tackled, a problem that is the essence of simplicity, yet as baffling as only true simplicity can be—that is to say, in the great 'tec traditions of Poe's "The Purloined Letter" and Chesterton's "The Invisible Man," subtly blended. . .

QUICKER THAN THE EYE

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Thomas Trumbull, who worked for the government as a cryptologist, was clearly uneasy. His tanned and wrinkled face was set in a carved attitude of worry. He said, "He's a man from the department—my superior, in fact. It's damned important, but I don't want Henry to feel the pressure."

He was whispering and he couldn't resist taking a quick look over his shoulder at Henry, the waiter at the Black Widowers monthly banquets. Henry, who was several years older than Trumbull, had a face that was unwrinkled, and, as he quickly set the table, he seemed tranquil and utterly unaware of the fact that five of the Black Widowers were huddled quietly at the opposite end of the room. Or, if aware, then certainly not disturbed.

Geoffrey Avalon, the tall patent lawyer, had, under the best of conditions, difficulty in keeping his voice low. Still, stirring his drink with a middle finger on the ice cube, he managed to impart sufficient hoarseness. "How can we

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prevent it, Tom? Henry is no fool, you know."

"I'm not sure anyone from the Federal administration qualifies as a guest, Tom," said writer Emmanuel Rubin in a swerving non sequitur. His sparse beard bristled truculently and his eyes flashed through the thick lenses of his glasses. "And I say that even though *you* are in that category. Eighty percent of the tax money I pay to Washington is expended in ways of which I strongly disapprove."

"You've got the vote, haven't you?" said Trumbull testily.

"And a fat lot of good that does when the manipulation—" began Rubin, quite forgetting to keep his voice low.

And oddly enough it was Roger Halsted, the mathematics teacher, whose quiet voice had difficulty in controlling a junior high-school class, who managed to stop Rubin in mid-roar. He did it by placing his hand firmly over the smaller man's mouth and saying, "You don't sound very happy about your boss coming here, Tom."

"I'm not," said Trumbull. "It's embarrassing. The point is, I've gotten considerable credit on two different occasions for matters that were really solved by Henry's insights. I've *had* to take the credit because what we say here in this room is confidential. Now something has come up and they're turning to me, and I'm as stuck as the rest of them. I've had to invite Bob here without really explaining why."

James Drake, the organic chemist, coughed over his cigarette and fingered his walrus-head bolo tie. "Have you been talking too much about our dinners, Tom?"

"I suppose it could be viewed in that way. What bothers me is Henry, though. He enjoys the game, I know, when it *is* a game; but if there's real pressure and he won't—or can't—under that pressure—"

"Then you'll look bad, eh, Tom?" said Rubin with a touch of malice.

Avalon said frigidly, "I have said before and I will say it again that what began as a friendly social get-together is becoming a strain on us all. Can't we have *one* session with just conversation?"

"I'm afraid not this one," said Trumbull. "All right, here's my boss. —Now let's carry all the load we can and put as little as possible on Henry."

It was at this point that artist Mario Gonzalo arrived, walking noisily up the stairs, uncharacteristically late, and resplendent in his long hair, a crimson jacket, and subtly

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matching striped shirt, to say nothing of a flowing scarf meticulously arranged to display the effect of casualness.

"Sorry I'm late, Henry—" But the proper drink was in his hand before he could say more. "Thanks, Henry. Sorry, fellows, trouble with getting a taxi. That put me in a grim mood and when the driver began to lecture me on the crimes and misdemeanors of the mayor I made the mistake of arguing with him."

"Lord help us," said Drake.

"I always argue every tenth time I hear that kind of nonsense. Then he managed to get lost and I didn't notice and it took us a long time to pull out. —I mean he was giving me this business about welfare recipients being a bunch of lazy, freeloading troublemakers and how no decent person should expect a handout but instead they should work for what they get and earn every cent. So I said what about sick people and old people and mothers with young children and he started telling me what a hard life *he* had led and *he* had never gone to anyone for a handout.

"Anyway, I got out and the fare came to $4.80, and it was a good half dollar more than it should have been because of his getting lost, so I counted out four singles and then spent some time getting the exact eighty cents in change and I handed it to him. He counted it, looked surprised, and I said, just as sweetly as I could, 'That's what you earned, driver. You looking for a handout, too?' "

Gonzalo burst out laughing, but no one joined him. Drake said, "That's a dirty trick on the poor guy just because you egged him into arguing."

Avalon stared down austerely from his lean height and said, "You might have gotten beaten up, Mario."

"That's a hell of an attitude you fellows are taking," said Gonzalo, aggrieved—and at that point Trumbull's boss appeared.

Trumbull introduced the newcomer all round, looking uncommonly subdued as he did so. The guest's name was Robert Alford Bunsen and he was both heavy and large. His face was pink and his white hair was sleeked back from an old-fashioned part down the middle.

"What will you have, Mr. Bunsen?" said Avalon, with a small and courtly bend at the middle. He was the only one present who was taller than the newcomer.

Bunsen cleared his throat. "Glad to meet you all. No, no, I've had my alcoholic calories

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for today. Some diet drink." He snapped his fingers at Henry, "A diet cola, waiter. If you don't have that, a diet-anything."

Gonzalo's eyes widened and Drake, whispering philosophically through the curling smoke of the cigarette stub held between his tobacco-stained fingers, said, "Oh, well, he's government."

"Still," muttered Gonzalo, "there's such a thing as common courtesy. You don't snap your fingers. Henry isn't a peon."

"You're rude to taxi drivers," said Drake. "This guy's rude to waiters."

"That's a different thing," said Gonzalo vehemently, his voice rising. "That was a matter of principle."

Henry, who had shown no signs of resentment at being finger-snapped, had returned with a bottle of soft drink on a tray and had presented it solemnly for inspection.

"Sure, sure," said Bunsen. Henry opened it, poured half its contents into an ice-filled glass, and let the foam settle. Bunsen took it and Henry left the bottle.

The dinner was less comfortable than many in the past. The only one who seemed unsubdued over the fact that the guest was a high, if a not-very-well-known, official of the government was Rubin. In fact, he seized the occasion to attack the government in the person of its surrogate by proclaiming loudly that diet drinks were one of the great causes of overweight in America.

"Because you drink a lot of them and the one or two calories per bottle mounts up?" asked Halsted, with as much derision as he could pack into his colorless voice.

"They've got more than one or two calories per bottle now that cyclamates have been eliminated on the basis of fallacious animal experiments," said Rubin hotly; "but that's not the point. Diet-anything is bad psychologically. Anyone overweight who takes a diet drink is overcome with virtue. He has saved two hundred calories, so he celebrates by taking another pat of butter and consuming three hundred calories. The only way to lose weight is to stay hungry. The hunger is telling you that you're getting less calories than you're using—"

Halsted, who knew very well there was a certain softness in his abdominal region, muttered, "Oh, well."

"But he's right," said Bunsen, attacking the veal marengo with gusto. "The diet drinks

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don't do me any good, but I like the taste. And I approve of looking at matters from the psychological angle."

Gonzalo, frowning, showed no signs of listening. When Henry bent over him to fill his coffee cup he said, "What do *you* think, Henry? I mean about the taxi driver. Wasn't I right?"

Henry said, "A gratuity is not quite a handout, Mr. Gonzalo. Personal service is customarily rewarded in a small way, but to equate that with welfare is not fair."

"You're just saying that because you—" began Gonzalo, and then he stopped abruptly.

Henry said, "Yes, I benefit in the same way the taxi driver does, but despite that I believe my statement to be correct."

Gonzalo threw himself back in his chair and chafed visibly.

"Gentlemen," said Trumbull, tapping his empty water-glass with a fork, as Henry poured the liqueur, "this is an interesting occasion. Mr. Bunsen, who is my superior at the department, has a small puzzle to present to us. Let's see what we can make of it." Again he cast a quick glance at Henry, who had replaced the bottle on the sideboard and now stood placidly in the background.

Bunsen, wiping his mouth with his napkin, and wheezing slightly, also cast an anxious glance at Henry. Trumbull leaned over to say, "Henry is one of us, Bob."

Trumbull went on, "Bob Bunsen is going to present merely the bare bones, to keep from distorting your view of the matter with unnecessary knowledge to begin with. I will remain out of it myself since I know too much about the matter."

Halsted leaned over to whisper to Drake, "I think it won't look good for Tom in the department if this doesn't work."

Drake shrugged, and mouthed rather than said, "He brought it on himself."

Bunsen, having adjusted the position of the bread basket unnecessarily—he had earlier prevented Henry from removing it—began, "I will give you those bare bones of a story. There's a man—call him Smith. We want him, but not just him. He's of little account. Clever at what he does, but of little account. If we get him we learn nothing of importance and we warn off men of greater importance. If, however, we can use him to lead us to the men of greater importance—"

"We all understand," interrupted Avalon.

Bunsen cleared his throat and made a new start. "Of

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course, we weren't sure about Smith in the beginning. It seemed very likely, but we weren't sure. If he was indeed a link in the chain we were trying to break up, then we reasoned that he transferred the information at a restaurant he regularly frequented. Part of the reasoning was based on psychology, something I imagine Mr. Rubin would approve of. Smith had the appearance and patina of a well-bred man-about-town who always did the correct social thing. On that basis we—"

He paused to think, then he said, "No, I'm getting off the subject and it's more than you need. To put it bluntly, we laid a trap for him." For a moment he reddened as though in bashfulness and then he went on firmly, "*I* laid the trap and it was damned complicated. We managed to beat down his caution, never mind how, and we ended with Smith having in his hand something he had to transfer. It was a legitimate item and would be useful to them, but not too useful. It would be well worth the loss to us if we had gained what we hoped to gain."

Bunsen looked about him, clearing his throat, but no one made a sound. Henry, standing by the sideboard, seemed to be a statue. Even the napkin he held did not move.

Bunsen said, "Smith walked into the restaurant with the object on his person. After he left the restaurant he did not have the object on his person. We know therefore that he transferred the object. What we don't know is the exact moment at which he transferred it, how he did it, and to whom he gave it. We have not been able to locate the object anywhere. Now ask your questions, gentlemen."

Trumbull said, "Let's try this one at a time. Mario?"

Gonzalo thought a moment, then shrugged. Twiddling his brandy glass between thumb and forefinger he said, "What did this object—as you call it—look like?"

"About an inch across and flat," said Bunsen. "It had a metallic shine, so it was easy to see. It was too large to swallow easily, heavy enough to make a noise if it were dropped, too thick to place in a crack, too heavy to stick easily to anything, and not iron, so there could be no tricks with magnets. The object, as I will continue to call it, was carefully designed to make the task of transferring, or hiding, difficult."

"But what did he do in the restaurant? He ate a meal, I suppose?" said Gonzalo.

"He ate a meal as usual."

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"Was it a fancy restaurant?"

"A fairly elaborate one—maître d', hatcheck girl, doorman, the works. He ate there regularly."

"I mean, there's nothing phony about the restaurant?"

"Not as far as we know, although in general that is not enough to allow us to display a blind trust in it and, believe me, we don't."

"Who was with him at the meal?"

"No one." Bunsen shook his head gravely. "He ate alone. That was his custom. He signed the check when he was through, as he always did. He had a charge account in the restaurant, you see. Then he left, took a taxi, and after a short while he was stopped and taken into custody. The object was no longer in his possession."

"Wait, now," said Gonzalo, his eyes narrowing. "You say he signed the check. What was it he wrote? Would you know?"

"We know very well. We have the check. He added a tip—quite the normal amount and we could find nothing wrong with that—and signed his name. That's all. Nothing more. He used the waiter's ballpoint pen and he returned the pen. Nor did he pass along anything else and the waiter did not escape scrutiny, I assure you."

Gonzalo said, "I pass."

Drake, stubbing out his cigarette, lifted a gray eyebrow as Trumbull's finger gestured at him. "I suppose Smith was kept under close surveillance while he was in the restaurant."

"As close as though he were a coat and we were the lining. We had two men in that restaurant, each at a table near him. They were trained men and capable ones and their entire task was to note every movement Smith made. He could not scratch himself without being noticed. He couldn't fumble at a button, crook a finger, shift a leg, or raise a buttock without it being noticed."

"Did he go to the Men's Room at any time?"

"No, he did not. If he had, we would have managed to follow."

"Were you there yourself, Mr. Bunsen?"

"I? No, I'm no good for that kind of surveillance. I'm too noticeable. What's needed to keep a man in view is a shadow with an ordinary face and an overwhelming lack of distinction in form and feature. I'm too big, too broad; I stand out."

Drake nodded. "Do you suppose Smith knew he was being watched?"

"He may have. People in his line of work don't last long if

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they don't assume at every moment that they might be watched. In fact, to be truthful, at one point I got a clear impression he felt he was being watched. I was across the street at a window, with a pair of binoculars. I could see him come out from the corner entrance of the restaurant.

"The doorman held the taxi door open for him and Smith paused for just a moment. He looked about him as though trying to identify those who might be watching. And he smiled, a tight smile, not one of amusement so much as one of bravado. At that moment I was sure we had lost. And as it turned out, we had."

"And you really are sure," said Drake, "that he had it on him when he walked into the restaurant and that he didn't have it on him when he left."

"We really are sure. When he walked in, there was what amounted to a pickpocketing, an inspection, and a replacement. He had it, you can take that as given. When he left and took a taxi, that taxi driver was one of our men who came in a completely natural manner when the doorman hailed him. Smith got in with no hint of suspicion. We are positive about that. The driver, one of our best men, then— But never mind that. The point is, Smith found himself in a kind of minor trouble that had, apparently, nothing to do with us. He was arrested, taken to the police station, and searched. Later, when it became obvious that we couldn't find the object, he was searched more thoroughly Eventually we used x-rays."

Drake said, "He might have left the object in the taxi."

"I doubt he could have done that with our man driving, and in any case the taxi was searched. See here," said Bunsen heavily, "there's no point in thinking we are incompetent in our business. When I say we watched, I mean that we watched with professional attention. When I say we searched, I mean we searched with professional thoroughness. You won't catch us on details."

"All right," said Drake, nodding, "but you missed, didn't you? The object was there and then it wasn't there, so either we call on the supernatural or we must admit that somewhere you failed Somewhere you blinked when you were watching or skipped when you were searching"

Bunsen looked rather as though he had bitten into a lemon. "There's no way of avoiding that conclusion, I suppose." Then, belligerently "But show me when, where, and how"

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Drake shook his head, but Halsted intervened rapidly, his high forehead pink with excitement. "Now wait, the hand is quicker than the eye. The thing you're looking for was shiny and heavy, but did it have to stay that way? Smith might have pressed it into a lump of clay Then he had something dull and shapeless which he could push against the bottom of a table or drop on the floor It might still be there."

Bunsen said, "The hand is quicker than the eye when you have an audience that doesn't know what to watch for We know all the tricks and we know what to expect. Smith couldn't have put the object into clay without our men knowing he was doing it. He couldn't have placed it under a table or on the floor without our men knowing he was doing just that."

"Yes," said Halsted, "but in these quicker-than-the-eye things a diversion is usually created Your men were looking at something else "

"There was no diversion, and in any case the restaurant was searched thoroughly as soon as Smith left "

"You couldn't have searched it thoroughly," protested Halsted. "There were still people eating there. Did you make them all leave?"

"We searched his table, his area, and eventually the whole restaurant. We are certain he did not leave the object behind anywhere. He did not leave anything behind anywhere."

Avalon had been sitting stiffly in his chair, his arms folded, his forehead creased in a portentous frown. His voice boomed out now. "Mr. Bunsen," he said, "I am not at all comfortable with this account of yours. I recognize the fact that you have told us very little and that neither places, names, occasions, nor identifications have been given.

"Nevertheless, you are telling me more than I want to know Have you permission from your superiors to tell us this? Are you quite certain in your mind that each one of us is to be trusted? You might get in trouble as a result and that would be regrettable, but I must admit that is not the point I am most concerned with at the moment. What *is* important is that I do not wish to become the object of questioning and investigation because you have seen fit to honor me with confidences I have not asked for "

Trumbull had vainly tried to break in and managed to say finally, "Come on, Jeff Don't act like the rear end of a horse "

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Bunsen raised a massive and pudgy hand. "That's all right, Tom. I see Mr. Avalon's point and, in a way, he's right. I *am* exceeding my authority and things *will* be sticky for me if some people decide they need a scapegoat. This little exercise of mine tonight, however, may get me off the hook if it works. To my way of thinking it's worth the gamble. Tom assured me it would be."

"What you're saying," said Trumbull, forcing a smile, "is that if the department jumps on you, you'll jump on me."

"Yes," said Bunsen, "and I weigh a lot." He picked up a breadstick and munched on it. "One more point. Mr Avalon asked if I were sure each of you could be trusted. Aside from the fact that Tom assured me you could be—not that I consider it safe to trust to personal assurances from even close friends—there has been a little bit of investigation. Nothing like a full-scale affair, you understand, but enough to give me confidence in all of you "

It was at this point that Henry cleared his throat gently and at once every face turned toward him

Trumbull said, "Have you got something, Henry?"

Bunsen gave Trumbull a clearly astonished look, but Trumbull said urgently, "Have you, Henry?"

"I only want to know," said Henry softly, "if I too have been cleared. I suspect I have not and that I should retire."

But Trumbull said, "For God's sake, nothing critical is being said."

Bunsen said, "Besides, the damage is done. Let him stay "

"It seems to me," said Henry, "that the damage is indeed done. Surely there is no longer any purpose to the investigation. The man you call Smith must know now that he is being watched. By the time you began to use x-rays on him he must have guessed he had been set up for a kill. Is he still in custody, by the way?"

"No, we had no grounds to keep him. He's released "

"Then the organization of which he is a part must undoubtedly know what has happened, and they will simply change their modus operandi. He will not be used further, perhaps, others involved will disappear. Methods will be entirely rearranged "

Bunsen said impatiently, "Yes, yes. Nevertheless, knowledge is important in itself. If we find out exactly how he transferred the object, we will know something about a mode of operation we didn't know before. We will, at the least, get

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an insight into a system of thought. - It is *always* important to know "

Henry said, "I see."

Trumbull said, "Is that all you see, Henry? Do *you* have any ideas?"

Henry shook his head. "It may be, Mr. Trumbull, that what has happened is complex and subtle. That would not be for me."

"Nonsense, Henry," said Trumbull.

"But it might be for Mr. Rubin," said Henry gravely. "I believe he is anxious to speak."

"Darn right," said Rubin loudly, "because I'm annoyed. Now, Mr. Bunsen, you talk about watching carefully and searching thoroughly, but I think you'll agree with me that it is very easy to overlook something that becomes obvious only after the fact. I can describe a way in which Smith could have transferred the object without any trouble, no matter how many people you had watching him "

"I would love to hear that description," said Bunsen.

"Okay, then, I will describe exactly what might have happened. I don't say it *did* happen, but it *could* have happened. Let me begin by asking a question." Rubin pushed his chair away from the table and, though he was short and smallboned, he seemed to tower.

"Mr. Bunsen," he said, "since your men watched everything, I assume they took note of the details of the meal he ordered. Was it lunch or dinner, by the way?"

"It was lunch and you are right. We did notice the details."

"Then isn't it a fact that he ordered a thick soup?"

Bunsen's eyebrows raised "A score for you, Mr. Rubin. It was cream of mushroom soup If you want the rest of the menu, it consisted of a roast beef sandwich with a side order of French-fried potatoes, a piece of apple pie with a slice of cheese, and coffee "

"Well," muttered Drake "We can't all be gourmets "

Rubin said, "Next, I would suggest that he only finished about half of his soup "

Bunsen thought for a while, then smiled It was the first time he had smiled that evening and he revealed white and even teeth that gave a clear indication that there was a handsome man beneath the layers of fat

"You know," he said, "I wouldn't have thought you could ask me a single question of fact concerning that episode that I could not instantly have answered, but you've managed

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to. I don't know, off-hand, if he finished his soup or not, but I'm sure that detail is on record. But let's pretend you are right and he finished only half of his soup. Go on."

"All right," said Rubin, "we begin. Smith walks into the restaurant with the object. Where does he have it, by the way?"

"Right-hand trousers pocket, when he walked in. We saw no signs whatever of his changing its position."

"Good," said Rubin. "He walks in, sits down at the table, orders his meal, reads his newspaper—was he reading a newspaper, Mr. Bunsen?"

"No," said Bunsen. "He wasn't reading anything, not even the menu. He knows the place and what it has to offer."

"Then once the first course was placed before him he sneezed. A sneeze, after all, is a diversion. Roger mentioned a diversion, but I guess he thought of someone rushing in with a gun or a fire starting in the kitchen. But a sneeze is a diversion, too, and is natural enough to go unnoticed."

"It would not have gone unnoticed," said Bunsen calmly. "He did not sneeze."

"Or coughed or hiccupped, what's the difference?" said Rubin. "The point is, something happened that made it natural for him to pull out a handkerchief—from the right-hand trousers pocket, I'm sure—and put it to his mouth."

"He did no such thing," said Bunsen.

"When he took away his hand," said Rubin, ignoring the other's denial, "the object that had been in the right trousers pocket was now in his mouth."

Bunsen said, "I don't think it would have been possible for him to place the object in his mouth without our seeing him do so, or keep it there without distorting his face noticeably. But go ahead, what next?"

"The soup is before him and he eats it. You certainly won't tell me he pushed it away untasted."

"No, I'm quite certain he didn't do that."

"Or that he drank it from the bowl."

Bunsen smiled, "No, I'm quite sure he didn't do that."

"Then there was only one thing he could do. He placed a tablespoon in the soup, brought it to his mouth, brought it back to the soup, brought it to his mouth, and so on. Correct?"

"I must agree with that."

"And on one of the occasions during which the tablespoon passed from mouth to bowl, the object was in the spoon. It was placed in the soup

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and since cream of mushroom soup is not transparent, it would not be seen there. He then drank no more of the soup and someone in the kitchen picked up the object." Rubin looked at the others triumphantly

There was a short silence. Bunsen said, "That is all you have to say, sir?"

"Don't you agree that's a possible modus operandi?"

"No, I don't." Bunsen sighed heavily. "Quite impossible. The hand is not quicker than the trained eye, and the object is large enough to have been an uncomfortable fit in the tablespoon. Furthermore, you again underestimate our experience and our thoroughness. We had someone in the kitchen and nothing came back from Smith's table without being thoroughly examined. If the soup bowl came back with soup in it, you can be sure it was carefully inspected before being emptied."

"How about the waiter?" interposed Avalon, forced into interest clearly against his will.

Bunsen said, "The waiter was not one of us. He was an old employee, but he was watched, too. And just as carefully.

Rubin snorted and said, "You might have told us you had a man in the kitchen."

"I might have," said Bunsen, "but Tom said it would be best to tell you as little as possible and let you probe from scratch."

Avalon said, "If you had incorporated a tiny radio transmitter in the object—"

"Then we would have been characters in a James Bond movie. Unfortunately, we must allow for expertise on the other side as well. If we had tried any such thing they would have tumbled to it. No, the trap had to be absolutely clean." Bunsen looked depressed. "I put a hell of a lot of time and effort into it." He looked about and the depression on his face deepened. "Well, Tom, are we through here?"

Trumbull said unhappily, "Wait a minute, Bob. Damn it, Henry—"

Bunsen said, "What do you want the waiter to do?"

Trumbull said, "Come on, Henry. Doesn't anything occur to you?"

Henry sighed gently. "Something did, quite a while back, but I was hoping it would be eliminated by your questions."

"Something quite plain and simple, Henry?" said Avalon.

"I'm afraid so, sir."

Avalon said, turning to Bunsen, "Henry is an honest man and lacks all traces of the devious mind. When we are

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through making fools of our selves over complexities, he picks up the one straight thread we have overlooked."

Henry said thoughtfully, "Are you sure you wish me to speak, Mr. Bunsen?"

"Yes. Go on."

"Well, then, when Mr Smith left the restaurant, I assume your men inside did not follow him out."

"No, of course not They had their own work inside. They had to make sure Smith had left nothing significant behind him."

"And the man in the kitchen stayed there?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, outside the restaurant the taxi driver was your man, but it would seem fair to suppose that he had to keep his eye on the traffic so he could maneuver himself to the curb just in time to pick up Smith, no sooner, no later "

"And a very good job he did In fact, when the doorman hailed him he neatly cut out another cab." Bunsen chuckled softly

"Was the doorman one of your men?" asked Henry

"No, he was a regular employee of the restaurant."

"Did you have a man on the street at all?"

"If you mean actually standing on the street, no "

"Then surely there was a moment or two after Smith had left the restaurant and before he had entered the taxi when he was not being watched—if I may call it so professionally."

Bunsen said, with a hint of contempt, "You forget that I was across the street, at a window, with a pair of binoculars. I saw him quite well. I saw the taximan pick him up. From the door of the restaurant to the door of the taxi took, I should say, not more than ten seconds, and I had him in view every second."

Rubin suddenly interrupted, "Even when you were distracted watching the taximan maneuver to the curb?"

He was universally shushed, but Bunsen said, "Even then."

Henry said, "I don't forget that you were watching, Mr Bunsen, but you have said you do not have the proper appearance for that kind of work. You do not watch professionally "

"I have eyes," said Bunsen, and now there was more than a hint of contempt. "Or will you tell me the hand *is* quicker than the eye?"

"Sometimes even when the hand is quite slow, I think Mr Bunsen, you arrived late and did not hear Mr Gonzalo's tale. He had paid a taxi driver exactly the fare recorded on the

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meter, and it is so customary to pay more that every one of us was shocked. Even I expressed disapproval. It is only when the completely customary is violated that the event is noticed. But when it takes place it is apt to be totally ignored."

Bunsen said, "Are you trying to tell me that something was wrong with our taxi driver? I tell you there wasn't."

"I am sure of that," said Henry earnestly. "Still, didn't you miss something that you took so entirely for granted that even looking at it you didn't see it?"

"I don't know what it could have been. I have an excellent memory, I assure you, and in the ten seconds that Smith took from restaurant to taxi, he did nothing I did not note and nothing I do not remember."

Henry thought for a few moments. "You know, Mr Bunsen, it *must* have happened, and if you had seen it happen, you would surely have taken action. But you did *not* take action; you are still mystified."

"Then whatever it was," said Bunsen, "it did not happen."

"You mean, sir, that the doorman, a regular employee of the restaurant, hailed a cab for Smith, who was a regular patron for whom he must have performed the same service many times, and that Smith, whom you described as a well-mannered man who always did the correct social thing, did not *tip* the doorman?"

"Of course he—" began Bunsen, and then stopped

And in the silence that followed, Henry said, "And if he tipped him, then surely it was with an object taken from the right-hand trousers pocket, an object that, from your description, looked like a coin —Then the man you call Smith smiled, and *that* you saw"

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a *NEW* short story by

EDMUND CRISPIN

first publication in the United States

There are freelance writers who discipline themselves to work regular office hours, from nine to five. But what happens when outsiders pay no attention to the "Please Do Not Disturb" sign and invade the writer's privacy?

The author's original title was in the contemporary fashion, especially for films. But EQMM's marquee (the Table of Contents page) has limitations of space, forcing us to abandon, with regret, Mr. Crispin's title—"We Know You're Busy Writing, But We Thought You Wouldn't Mind If We Just Dropped In for a Minute"...

DANGER, WRITER AT WORK

by EDMUND CRISPIN

"After all, it's only us," they said.

I must introduce myself.

None of this is going to be read, let alone printed. Ever.

Nevertheless, there is a habit—the habit of putting words together in the most effective order you can think of. There is self-respect, too. That, and habit, make me try to tell this as if it were in fact going to be read.

Which God forbid.

I am 47, unmarried, living alone, a minor crime-fiction writer, earning, on average, a thousand pounds a year.

I live in Devon, in a small cottage which is isolated, in the sense that there is no one nearer than a quarter of a mile.

I am not, however, at a loss for company.

For one thing, I have a telephone.

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I am a hypochondriac, well into the coronary belt. Also, I go in fear of accidents, with broken bones. The telephone is thus a necessity I can afford only one, so its location in the cottage is a matter of great discretion. It is in the hall, just at the foot of the steep stairs, on a shelf only two feet from the floor, so that if I have to crawl to it, it will still be within reach

If I have my coronary *upstairs*, too bad

The telephone is for me to use in an emergency Other people, however, regard it differently

Take, for example, my Bank Manager

"Torhaven 153." I say to the ring

"Hello? Bradley, is that Mr Edward Bradley?"

"Bradley speaking "

"This is Wimpole Mr Bradley, I have to talk to you "

"Speaking "

"Now, it's like this, Mr Bradley How soon can we expect some further payments in, Mr Bradley? Payments out, yes, we have plenty of those, but payments in "

"I'm doing everything I can, Mr Wimpole "

Everything, yes, everything, but payments in What is going to be coming in during the next month Mr Bradley?"

"Quite a lot, I hope."

"Yes, you hope, Mr Bradley, you hope. But what am I going to say to my Regional Office, Mr. Bradley? How am I going to represent the matter to them? You have this accommodation with us, this matter of five hundred pounds—"

"Had it for years, Mr Wimpole."

"Yes, Mr. Bradley, and that is exactly the trouble. You must reduce it, Mr. Bradley, reduce it, I say," this lunatic bawls at me.

I can no more reduce my overdraft than I can fly.

I am adequately industrious I aim to write 2000 words a day, which would support me in the event that I were ever able to complete them. But if you live alone you are not, contrary to popular supposition, in a state of unbroken placidity

Quite the contrary

I have tried night work, a consuming yawn to every tap on the typewriter I have tried early morning work

And here H. L. Mencken comes in, suggesting that bad writing is due to bad digestion

My own digestion is bad at any time, particularly bad during milkmen's hours, and I have never found that I could do much in the dawn. This is a

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weakness, and I admit it. But apparently it has to be. Work, for me, is thus office hours, nine till five.

I have told everyone about this, begging them, if it isn't a matter of emergency, to get in touch with me in the *evenings*. Office hours, I tell them, same as everyone else. You wouldn't telephone a solicitor about nothing in particular during his office hours, would you? Well, so why ring me?

I am typing a sentence which starts: *His crushed hand, paining him less now, nevertheless gave him a sense of*

I know what's going to happen after "of": *the appalling frailty of the human body.*

Or rather, I did know, and it wasn't that. It might have been that (feeble though it is) but for the fact that then the doorbell rang.

It was a Mrs. Prance morning, but she hadn't yet arrived, so I answered the door myself, clattering down from the upstairs room where I work. It was the meter reader. The meter being outside the door, I was at a loss to know why I had to sanction its being scrutinized.

"A sense of the dreadful agonies," I said to the meter reader, "of which the human body is capable."

"Wonderful weather."

"I'll leave you, if you don't mind. I'm a bit busy."

"Suit yourself," he said, offended.

Then Mrs. Prance came.

Mrs. Prance comes three mornings a week. She is slow and deaf, but she is all I can hope to get, short of winning the Football Pools.

She answers the door, but is afraid of the telephone, and consequently never answers that, though I've done my utmost to train her to it.

She is very anxious that I should know precisely what she is doing in my tatty little cottage, and approve of it.

"Mr. Bradley?"

"Yes, Mrs. Prance?"

"It's the Hi-glow."

"What about it, Mrs. Prance?"

"Pardon?"

"I said, what about it?"

"We did ought to change."

"Yes, well, let's change, by all means."

"Pardon?"

"I said, 'Yes'."

"Doesn't bring the wood up, not the way it ought to."

"You're the best judge."

"Pardon?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Prance, but I'm working now. We'll talk about it some other time."

"Toffee-nosed," says Mrs. Prance.

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Gave him a sense of—a sense of—a sense of burr-burr, burr-burr, burr-burr

Mrs. Prance shouts that it's the telephone.

I stumble downstairs and pick the thing up.

"Darling."

"Oh, hello, Chris."

"How are you, darling?"

"A sense of the gross cruelty which filled all history."

"What, darling? What was that you said?"

"Sorry. I was just trying to keep a glass of water balanced on my head."

A tinkle of laughter.

"You're a poppet. Listen, I've had a wonderful idea. It's a party. Here in my flat. Today week. You will come, Edward, won't you?"

"Yes, of course I will, Chris, but may I remind you about something?"

"What's that, darling?"

"You said you wouldn't ring me up during working hours."

A short silence, then: "Oh, but *just this once.* It's going to be such a lovely party, darling. You don't mind *just this once.*"

"Chris, are you having a coffee break?"

"Yes, darling, and oh, God, don't I need it!"

"Well, I'm *not* having a coffee break."

A rather longer silence, then: "You don't love me any more."

"It's just that I'm trying to get a story written. There's a deadline for it."

"If you don't want to come to the party, all you've got to do is say so."

"I do want to come to the party, but I also want to get on with earning my living. Seriously, Chris, as it's a week ahead, couldn't you have waited till this evening to ring me?"

A sob. "I think you're beastly. I think you're utterly, utterly *horrible.*"

"Chris."

"And I never want to *see* you again."

A sense of treachery, I typed sedulously. *The agony still flamed up his arm, but it was*

The doorbell rang.

it was now less than—more than—

"It's the laundry, Mr. Bradley," Mrs. Prance shouted up the stairs at me.

"Coming, Mrs. Prance."

I went out onto the small landing. Mrs. Prance's great moon face peered up at me from below.

"Coming Thursday next week," she shouted at me, "because of Good Friday."

"Yes, Mrs. Prance, but what has that got to do with *me*? I mean, you'll be here on Wednesday as usual, won't you, to change the sheets?"

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"Pardon?"

"Thank you for telling me, Mrs. Prance."

One way and another it was a remarkable Tuesday morning: seven telephone calls, none of them in the least important, eleven people at the door, and Mrs. Prance anxious that no scintilla of her efforts should lack my personal verbal approval. I sat down in front of my typewriter at 9:30. By noon I had achieved the following:

His crushed hand, paining him less now, nevertheless gave him a sense of treachery, the appalling frailty of the human body, but it was now less than it had been, more than indifferent to him since, after, because though the pain could be shrugged off the betrayal was a

I make no pretense to be a quick writer, but that really was a very bad morning indeed.

Afternoon started better. With some garlic sausage and bread inside me I ran to another seven paragraphs, unimpeded.

As he clawed his way out, hatred seized him, I tapped out, enthusiastically embarking on the eighth paragraph. *No such emotion had ever before*

The doorbell rang.

had ever before disturbed his quiet existence. It was as if

The doorbell rang again, lengthily, someone leaning on it.

as if a beast had taken charge, a beast inordinate, insatiable.

The doorbell was now ringing for many seconds at a time, uninterruptedly.

Was this a survival factor, or would it blur his mind? He scarcely knew. One thing was abundantly clear, namely that he was going to have to answer the bloody doorbell.

He did so.

On the doorstep, their car standing in the lane beyond, were a couple in early middle age, who could be seen at a glance to be fresh out from The Duke.

The Duke of Devonshire is my local. When I first moved to this quiet part of Devon I had nothing against The Duke: it was a small village pub serving small village drinks, with an occasional commercialized pork pie or sausage roll.

But then it changed hands. A Postgate admirer took over. Hams, game patties, quail eggs, and other such fanciful foods were introduced to a noise of trumpets; esurient lunatics began rolling up in every sort of car, gobble-made for exotic Ploughman's Lunches and suavely served lobster creams, their throats parched for the vinegar of 1964 clarets or the

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ullage of the abominable home-brewed beer; and there was no longer any peace for anyone.

In particular, there was no longer any peace for me. "Let's go and see old Ted," people said to one another as they were shooed out of the bar at closing time. "He lives near here."

"Charles," said this man on the doorstep, extending his hand.

The woman with him tittered. She had fluffy hair, and lips so pale that they stood out disconcertingly, like scars, against her blotched complexion. "It's Ted, lovey," she said.

"Ted, of course it's Ted. Known him for years. How are you, Charley boy?"

"*Ted*, angel."

I recognized them both, slightly, from one or two parties. They were presumably a married couple, but not married for long, if offensive nonsenses like "Angel" were to be believed.

"We're not interrupting anything," she said.

Interested by this statement of fact, I found spouting up in my pharynx the reply, "Yes, you sodding well are." But this had to be choked back; bourgeois education forbids such replies, other than euphemistically.

"Come on in," I said.

They came on in.

I took them into the downstairs living room, which lack of money has left a ghost of its original intention. There are two armchairs, a chesterfield, a coffee table, a corner cupboard for drinks; but all, despite Hi-glow, dull and tattered on the plain carpet.

I got them settled on the chesterfield.

"Coffee?" I suggested.

But this seemed not to be what was wanted.

"You haven't got a drink, old boy?" the man said.

"*Stanislas*," the girl said.

"Yes, of course. Whiskey? Gin? Sherry?"

"Oh, Stanislas darling, you are *awful*," said this female. "Fancy *asking*."

I had no recollection of the name of either of them, but surely Stanislas couldn't be right. "Stanislas?" I asked.

"It's private," she said, taking one of his hands in one of hers, and wringing it. "You don't mind? It's sort of a joke. It's private between us."

"I see. Well, what would you like to drink?"

He chose whiskey, she gin and Italian.

"If you'll excuse me I'll have to go upstairs for a minute," I said, after serving them.

One thing was abundantly

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clear: Giorgio's map had been wrong, and as a consequence

"Ooh-hooh!"

I went out onto the landing.

"Yes?"

"We're lonely."

"Down in just a minute."

"You're doing that nasty writing."

"No, just checking something."

"We heard the typewriter. Do come down, Charles, Edward I mean, we've got something terribly, terribly important to tell you."

"Coming straight away," I said, my mind full of Giorgio's map.

I refilled their glasses.

"You're Diana," I said to her.

"Daphne," she squeaked.

"Yes, of course, Daphne. Drink all right?"

She took a great swallow of it, and so was unable to speak. Stanislas roused himself to fill the conversation gap.

"How's the old writing, then?"

"Going along well."

"Mad Martians, eh? Don't read that sort of thing myself, I'm afraid, too busy with biography and history. Has Daphne told you?"

"No. Told me what?"

"About Us, old boy, about Us."

This was the first indication I'd had that they *weren't* a married couple. Fond locutions survive courtship by God knows how many years, fossilizing to automatic gabble, and so are no guide to actual relationships. But in "Us," the capital letter, perfectly obvious, flag-wags something new.

"Ah, ha!" I said.

With an effort Stanislas leaned forward. "Daphne's husband is a beast," he said, enunciating distinctly.

"Giorgio's map," I said. "Defective."

"A mere brute. So she's going to throw in her lot with me."

Satisfied, he fell back onto the cushions. "Darling," he said.

As a consequence we were two miles southwest of our expected position. "So what is the expected position?" I asked.

"We're eloping," Daphne said.

"This very day. Darling."

"Angel."

"Yes, this very day," said Stanislas, ostentatiously sucking up the last drops from the bottom of his glass. "This very day as ever is. We've planned it," he confided.

The plan had gone wrong, had gone rotten. Giorgio had failed.

"Had gone rotten," I said,

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hoping I might just possibly remember the phrase when this pair of lunatics had taken themselves off.

"Rotten is the word for that creep," said Stanislas. Suddenly his eyes filled with alcoholic tears. "What Daphne has suffered, no one will ever know," he gulped. "There's even been . . . beating." Daphne lowered her lids demurely, in tacit confirmation. "So we're off and away together," said Stanislas, recovering slightly. "A new life. Abroad. A new humane relationship."

But was his failure final? Wasn't there still a chance?

"If you'll excuse me," I said, "I shall have to go upstairs again."

But this attempt aborted. Daphne seized me so violently by the wrist, as I was on the move, that I had difficulty in not falling over sideways.

"You're with us, aren't you?" she breathed.

"Oh, yes, of course."

"My husband would come after us, if he knew."

"A good thing he doesn't know, then."

"But he'll guess. He'll guess it's Stanislas."

"I suppose so."

"You don't mind us being here, Charles, do you? We have to wait till dark."

"Well, actually, there is a bit of work I ought to be getting on with."

"I'm sorry, Ted," she said, smoothing her skirt. "We've been inconsiderate. We must go." She went on picking at her hemline, but there was no tensing of the leg muscles, preliminary to rising, so I refilled her glass.

"No, don't go," I said, the British middle class confronting its finest hour. "Tell me more about it."

"Stanislas."

"H'm, h'm."

"Wake *up*, sweetie-pie. Tell Charles all about it."

Stanislas got himself approximately upright. "All about what?"

"About Us, angel."

But the devil of it was, if Giorgio's map was wrong, our chances had receded to nil.

"To nil," I said. "Nil."

"Not nil at all, old boy," Stanislas said. "And as a matter of fact, if you don't mind my saying so, I rather resent that 'nil.' We may not be special, like writer blokes like you, but we aren't 'nil,' Daphne and me. We're human, and so forth. Cut us and we bleed, and that. I'm no great cop, I'll grant you that, but Daphne—Daphne—"

"A splendid girl," I said.

"Yes, you say that now, but what would you have said five minutes ago? Eh? Eh?"

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"The same thing, of course."

"You think you're rather marvelous, don't you? You think you've . . . got it made. Well, let me tell you one thing, Mr. so-called Bradley: you may think you're very clever, with all this writing of Westerns and so on, but I can tell you, there are more important things in life than Westerns. I don't suppose you'll understand about it, but there's Love.

"Daphne and I, we love one another. You can jeer, and you do jeer. All I can tell you is you're wrong as can be. Daphne and I, we're going off together, and to hell with people who jeer."

"Have another drink."

"Well, thanks, I don't mind if I do."

They stayed for four whole hours.

Somewhere in the middle they made a pretense of drinking tea. Some time after that they expressed concern at the length of time they had stayed—without, however, giving any sign of leaving. I gathered, as Giorgio and his map faded inexorably from my mind, that their elopement plans were dependent on darkness: this, rather than the charm of my company, was what they were waiting for.

Meanwhile, with my deadline irrevocably lost, I listened to their soul searching—he unjustifiably divorced, she tied to a brutish lout who unfortunately wielded influence over a large range of local and national affairs, and would pursue her to the ends of the earth unless precautions were taken to foil him.

I heard a good deal about these precautions, registering them without, at the time, realizing how useful they were going to be.

"Charles, Edward."

"Yes?"

"We've been inconsiderate."

"Of course not."

"We haven't been letting you get on with your work."

"Too late now."

"Not really too late," lachrymosely. "You go and write, and we'll just sit here, and do no harm to a soul."

"I've rather forgotten what I was saying, and in any case I've missed the last post."

"Oh, Charles, Charles, you shame us. We abase ourselves."

"No need for that."

"*Naturally* we abase ourselves. We've drunk your liquor, we've sat on your . . . your sofa, we've stopped your working. Sweetie-pie, isn't that true? Haven't we stopped him working?"

"If you say so, sweetie-pie."

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"I most certainly do say so. And it's a disgrace."

"So we're disgraced, Poppet. Bad," she said histrionically. "But are we so bad? I mean, he's self-employed, he's got all the time in the world, he can work whenever he likes. Not like you and me. He's got it *made*."

"Oh, God," I mumbled.

"Well, that's true," Stanislas said, with difficulty. "And it's a nice quiet life."

"Quiet, that's it."

"Don't have to do anything if you don't want to. Ah, come the day."

"He's looking cross."

"What's that? Old Charles looking cross? Angel, you're mistaken. Don't you believe it. Not cross, Charles, are you?"

"We *have* stayed rather long, darling. Darling, are you awake? I say, we *have* stayed rather long."

"H'm."

"But it's special. Edward, it's special. You do see that, don't you? Special. Because of Stanislas and me."

I said, "All I know is that I—"

"Just this once," she said. "You'll forgive us just this once? After all, you *are* a free agent. After all, it's only us."

I stared at them.

I looked at him, nine-tenths asleep. I looked at her, half asleep. I thought what a life they were going to have if they eloped together.

But "It's only us" had triggered something.

I remember that on just that one day, there had been Mrs. Prance, the meter reader, Chris (twice: she had telephoned a second time during working hours to apologize for telephoning for the first time during working hours), the laundryman, the grocer (no Chivers peas this week), my tax accountant, a woman collecting for the Church, a Frenchman wanting to know if he was on the right road to The Duke.

I remembered that a frippet had come from the National Insurance, or whatever it's called now, to ask what I was doing about Mrs. Prance, and if not, why not. I remembered a long inconclusive telephone call from someone's secretary at the B.B.C.—the someone, despite his anxiety to be in touch with me, having vanished without notice into the B.B.C. Club. I remembered that undergraduates at the University of Essex were wanting me to give them a talk, and were going to be so good as to pay second-class rail fare, though no fee.

I remembered that my whole morning's work had been a single botched paragraph, and that my afternoon's work,

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before this further interruption, had been little more than two hundred words.

I remembered that I had missed the post.

I remembered that I had missed the post before, for much the same reasons, and that publishers are unenthusiastic about writers who keep failing to meet deadlines.

I remembered that I was very short of money, and that giving drinks to almost total strangers for four hours on end wasn't the best way of improving the situation.

I remembered.

I saw red.

A red mist swam before his eyes, doing the butterfly stroke.

I picked up the poker from the fireplace and went around behind them.

Did they—I sometimes ask myself—wonder what I could possibly be doing, edging round the back of the chesterfield with a great lump of iron in my hand?

They were probably too far gone to wonder.

In any case they weren't left wondering for long.

Eighteen months have passed.

At the end of the first week a Detective Constable came to see me. His name was Ellis. He was thin to the point of emaciation, and seemed, despite his youth, permanently depressed. He was in plain clothes.

He told me that their names were Daphne Fiddler and Clarence Oates.

"Now, sir, we've looked into this matter, and we understand that you didn't know this lady and gentleman at all well."

"I'd just met them once or twice."

"They came here, though, that Tuesday afternoon."

"Yes, but they'd been booted out of the pub. People often come here because they've been booted out of the pub."

Lounging on the chesterfield, ignoring its blotches, Ellis said, "They were looking for a drink, eh?"

"Yes, they did seem to be doing that."

"I'm not disturbing your work, sir, I hope."

"Yes, you are, Officer, as a matter of fact. So did they."

"If you wouldn't mind, sir, don't call me 'Officer.' I am one, technically. But as a mode of address it's pointless."

"Sorry."

"I'll have to disturb your work a little bit more still, sir, I'm afraid. Now, if I may ask, did this—this *pair*—say anything to you about their plans?"

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"Did they say anything to anyone else?"

"Yes, Mr. Bradley, to about half the population of South Devon."

"Well, I can tell you what they said to me. They said they were going to get a boat from Torquay to Jersey, and then a plane from Jersey to Guernsey, and then a Hovercraft from Guernsey to France. They were going to carry their passports with them, and cash sewn into the linings of their clothes. Then they were going on from France to some other country, where they could get jobs without a *permis de sejour.*"

"Some countries, there's loopholes big as a camel's gates," said Ellis biblically.

I said, "They'll make a mess of it, you know."

"Hash slinging for her," said Ellis despondently, "and driving a taxi for him. What was the last you saw of them?"

"They drove off."

"Yes, but when?"

"Oh, after dark. Perhaps seven. What happened to them after that?"

"The Falls."

"Sorry?"

"The *Falls.* Their car was found abandoned there."

"Oh."

"No luggage in it."

"Oh."

"So presumably they got on the Torquay bus."

"You can't find out?"

Ellis wriggled on the cushions. "Driver's an idiot. Doesn't see or hear *anything.*"

"I was out at the Falls myself."

"Pardon?"

"I say, I was out at the Falls myself. I followed them on foot—though of course I didn't *know* I was doing that."

"Did you see their car there?" Ellis asked.

"I saw several cars, but they all look alike nowadays. And they all had their lights off. You don't go around peering into cars at the Falls that have their lights off."

"And then, sir?"

"I just walked back. It's a fairly normal walk for me in the evenings, after I've eaten. I mean, it's a walk I often take."

(And I had, in fact, walked back by the lanes as usual, resisting the temptation to skulk across fields. Good for me to have dumped the car unnoticed near the bus stop, and good for me to have remembered about the luggage before I set out.)

"Good for me," I said.

"Pardon?"

"Good for me to be able to do that walk, still."

Ellis unfolded himself, getting up from the chesterfield. Good for me that

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he hadn't got a kit with him to test the blotches.

"It's just a routine inquiry, Mr. Bradley," he said faintly, his vitality seemingly at a low ebb. "Mrs. Fiddler's husband, Mr. Oates's wife, they felt they should inquire. Missing Persons, you see. But just between ourselves," he added, his voice livening momentarily, "they neither of 'em care a button. It's obvious what's happened, and they neither of 'em care a button. Least said, Mr. Bradley, soonest mended."

He went.

I should have felt guilty; but in fact I felt purged.

Catharsis.

Am I purged of pity? I hope not. I feel pity for Daphne and Stanislas, at the same time as irritation at their unconscionable folly.

Purged of fear?

Well, in an odd sort of way, yes.

Things have gotten worse for me. The strain of reducing my overdraft by £250 has left me with Mrs. Prance only two days a week, and rather more importantly, I now have to count the tins of baked beans and the loaves I shall use for toasting.

But I feel better.

The interruptions are no less than before. Wimpole, Chris, my tax accountant all help to fill my working hours in the same old way.

But now I feel almost indulgent toward them. Toward everyone, even Mrs. Prance.

For one thing, I garden a lot.

I get a fair number of flowers, but this is more luck than judgment. Vegetables are my chief thing.

And this autumn the cabbages have done particularly well. Harvest cabbages, they stand up straight and conical, their dark green outer leaves folded close, moisture-globed, protecting firm crisp hearts.

For harvest cabbages you can't beat nicely rotted organic fertilizer.

Can I ever bring myself to cut my harvest cabbages and eat them?

At the *moment* I don't want to eat my harvest cabbages. But I daresay in the end I shall.

After all, it's only them.

"Q"

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introducing an author new to EQMM . . .

Bruce M. Fisher submitted a story to EQMM, but we were not satisfied with the ending. We asked the author to devise a different ending, and he came up with not one but two. In both new versions the basic plot of the story remained the same, but one new ending was in the human-interest school, the other in the deductive-detective school. Strangely, some of our manuscript readers preferred one ending, some preferred the other. Although the Editor had a definite preference, he was reluctant to disregard the preference of some of his staff. So we decided, as an experiment, to give you—a variation of "The Lady, or the Tiger?"—both endings, and we'd be interested to learn, if you would care to give your opinions, which ending you *prefer. . .*

STORY WITH TWO ENDINGS

by BRUCE M. FISHER

"But can you really blame them?" Stanley Ainsworth, head cashier of Stone's Security and Express, touched the tips of his bony fingers together and regarded Lieutenant George Harris over the pale steeple. Steel-rimmed glasses magnified the concern in his mild blue eyes. "The world's gone mad. Prices rise and rise. Surely a sense of desperation drove them to it?"

It was Thursday evening and the two had just come from Ainsworth's basement recreation room after a game of billiards and due admiration of the rich paneling installed three months before.

"The reason is beside the point," Harris replied from the study sofa. "Robbery is robbery, whether it's fifty cents today or your company's $200,000 last weekend. There's only one difference: the higher the amount, the greater the hazard. Justice is geared to that differential."

"Is it?" Ainsworth tapped his desk pointedly. "Consider

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the legal robberies that harass this country every hour of every day. The taxes, open or hidden, that squeeze us and do little to benefit mankind. The avaricious, ever-increasing prices on every article on every store counter. The false charges tacked onto every repair bill, whether for the human body, the car you drive, or the appliance you bought last month. This is robbery on a grand scale—untold millions of dollars each year; yet no one is jailed for it. At least theirs was robbery without disguise."

"You're a moralist," Harris said. "I'm a detective. You'd like to see a perfect society. I know we'll never have one." He lit a cigarette to smother a vague feeling of insecurity.

"Moralist?" A smile flitted over Ainsworth's lean face. "I suppose I am. The firm is most concerned about the missing money—Keeler, the manager, is furious—and rightly so. But to me the real crime is betrayal." He emphasized the word. "Both were trusted employees. Christine Blydon was with us seven years, Joseph Crangle eight. And they betrayed that trust."

Harris nodded soberly. "We'll get them, Stanley. It may take some time but we will get them. It's a pity they got such a head start."

"They timed it perfectly," Ainsworth agreed. "Of course, she was the mastermind. As assistant cashier, it was not unusual for her to be the last one to put money in the vault on Saturday and then to set the time lock. We trusted her implicitly, worse luck, never dreaming she would set it for a chosen hour of robbery. With Crangle's office key providing legal means of entry it was no trick at all for them to rob the strongest vault in town."

"Resetting the time mechanism to open on the Monday afternoon after the theft gained them extra time," Harris admitted. "You couldn't be absolutely certain until then. Lots of people don't report for work on Monday mornings."

"When I saw that fragment of a ten-dollar bill on the floor near the vault," Ainsworth said. "I knew in my bones we had been robbed. Intuition, I guess. But I phoned their homes before calling you. Keeler didn't like that—he wanted to wait." Again he placed his fingertips together and gazed at Harris. "I wonder where they are now?"

"We haven't a clue," Harris replied honestly. "I'm glad you had sense to call quickly, though. It helped us locate Crangle's car when his wife reported him missing. I guess she feared something like this.

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We found the car in a rear corner of the airport parking lot. With changed license plates. Another little trick to gain time."

"His wife's in bad shape, I take it?"

"Very bad shape." Harris butted his cigarette savagely. "The damned rogue! Married ten years, fathered three kids, then skips out with the girl friend and $200,000! In my books desertion is both robbery and betrayal."

"Girl friend? Well, I'll be blessed! They certainly gave no indication of *that* around the office. So they were more than criminal accomplices?"

"According to Mrs. Crangle, her husband spent many nights away from home this past year. That's why she didn't phone us until late Sunday afternoon. The woman has pride. But you can't live on pride," Harris added.

"I imagine Crangle will send her some money wherever he goes," Ainsworth remarked. "Guilty conscience, you know. But there's probably a reason why he, ah, strayed. Some women, married ten years, turn shrewish, or fasten too much attention on their children, or prove neglectful in other ways. A man's ego is like a tender plant—it requires constant care and warmth, but a sudden chill may prove disatrous."

"Ego, my foot!" Harris retorted. "That's only a crutch, an excuse. Mrs. Crangle struck me as a loving, lovable woman, just the right height and nicely rounded in all the right places, perhaps a trifle plump but a good woman, a cosy comfortable woman to have around. Something like my Emily."

"How old would she be? To bear this shame, I mean?"

"About thirty-five, I guess. And if Crangle does send money, she'll turn it over to us immediately. She wouldn't use that kind of money."

"It's a pity the innocent have to suffer because of others' criminal acts," Ainsworth said. "I wish I could do something to help her. Until this happened, I thought Joseph Crangle a most upright and dutiful man. A good guard, solid, even handsome in a rugged way."

"And rotten to the core. You can't go by outward expressions, Stanley. Smiling people can murder in their hearts."

"It's Cain's legacy," Ainsworth replied, "but we don't all have it. Some of us have a built-in spiritual balance."

"Yes," Harris agreed. "But when that balance tips, we police are kept busy. And temptation comes in many

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forms. Christine Blydon was a good-looker, judging by the bond pictures Keeler gave us. Incidentally, her apartment was a cut above the average for a working girl. Tastefully appointed, I would say. A bit too much on the gaudy side, though."

He gazed around the study. After twenty-five years with Stone's Security and Express, Ainsworth could afford those shelves of leather-bound books, the expensive stereo, the fine paintings, the costly furniture. But it was a gloomy retreat. It, and Ainsworth, needed a ray of sunshine. The man was 48, still a bachelor—but then, it took all kinds to make a world.

"Gaudy?" Ainsworth frowned in puzzlement. "Odd. I never considered her the kind who would like gaudy things. Intelligent, well informed, but rather on the dull side, I thought. In fact, it was her air of reserve that—" He paused, toying with a carved ebony paperweight, and flushed slightly. "I dated her a few times, you know. She was excellent company, at first. All level and aboveboard, you understand," he added hastily.

"Of course." Harris grinned, imagining staid old Ainsworth making conversation with a woman half his age. On Sundays, probably, strolling in the park. Or dining after the theater. "When was this?"

"I dated her for the last time when the Tolman Ensemble was in town. That would be—two years ago? My, how time flies! But I was grievously disappointed. She had absolutely no ear for music. The evening was ruined and I resolved never to repeat it."

"No woman is perfect." Harris glanced at the mantel clock over the curio case. "You really should marry, Stanley. It would open up new avenues—"

"I'll marry when I find a woman who suits me," Ainsworth interrupted. "I haven't yet. And I will not be taken in by shameful pretense."

"Of course not," Harris soothed. His mind leaped back more than 30 years to the ugliest girl in school, Millie Cairns, who had somehow inveigled shy sensitive Stanley Ainsworth to a secluded corner of the yard. A nasty little trick. Chuck Mardell, the school bully, had bounded from behind a nearby elm when Millie tore her blouse open, clutched her skirt, and screeched for help.

You didn't forget things like that, the humiliation, the beating, the tears of laughter rolling down Millie's mean face. Harris, a stocky lad then, had interfered and got a black eye

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and split lip for his pains.

A traumatic experience. Perhaps that was why Harris had become a policeman. But all women weren't like Millie. Ainsworth should realize that. "Emily and the children have made me very happy," he said.

"I have my little circle of friends," Ainsworth said. "Bridge once a week, golf occasionally, club friends, and now billiard friends. With books, music, and responsible work I keep life interesting and uncomplicated. But we were discussing the robbery. That deluded pair, Christine Blydon and Joseph Crangle, must be somewhere."

"They're missing, all right, and so is $200,000," Harris said. "Fingerprints confirm Crangle's visits to Miss Blydon's apartment. They wore gloves from start to finish on the actual job, however. We did get some partial prints of Miss Blydon's on the handle of the vault door—probably made when she closed up Saturday afternoon—but nothing else."

"Naturally, they would wear gloves."

"Only Keeler and Crangle had keys to that iron-barred office," Harris continued. "Keeler's clean—he was at home with witnesses. Joseph Crangle isn't clean, and neither is Miss Blydon. Need I mention that we have flashed their descriptions all over this continent?"

"What if they are being cagey and hiding out within, say, ten or twenty miles of here?"

"Definitely not," Harris said. "There's only one fast way to temporarily disguise a car of popular make, model, and color, and that's by changing the license plates. It wouldn't be necessary for a short quick jump. But to gain time, to go far away, possibly with devious interchanging of flights, it would be. I admit those license plates had us stumped at first. But we puzzled it out. Yes, we're convinced they pulled the robbery last Saturday night and fled by plane immediately after. Which flight or where to, we don't know, unfortunately."

"I imagine they would hurry off."

"A torn piece of air-ticket envelope on the catch of the glove compartment indicates advance purchase and haste in departure." Harris laughed drily. "But trust a woman to do her face in spite of the hurry. We found lipstick on a wad of tissue in Crangle's car. Matches the lipstick and tissue we found in her apartment."

"Wouldn't they be seen taking off in a plane?"

"We checked that. Nobody remembers them. But who

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would on these busy weekends, with big crowds coming and going? We weren't on the lookout for them then, you know. And disguises are as easy as fake names—you can buy a wig in any department store. Anyhow, they're gone, loot and all. A clean getaway."

He glanced again at the clock. "Ten o'clock already? Emily will be worrying." He rose. "She worries a lot these days. It's the uncertainty of my job, I guess."

Ainsworth saw him to the door. "A sad business altogether, George. Robbery, betrayal, desertion. . .Give my regards to Emily."

"Thanks, I will. Don't worry, Stanley. We'll get them sooner or later." And Harris stepped out into the warm cloudy night.

Ainsworth watched him go and then, locking the door and wearing a satisfied expression, went downstairs to his basement recreation room. He replaced the billiard balls with pool balls and played leisurely before striding to the end wall. Starting near the left side, he tapped the mahogany panels gently. Toward the middle his bony knuckles produced a different tone, slightly deeper and more resonant. He smiled.

The police would never find Christine Blydon and Joseph Crangle. They were behind that wall, in the little recess which so neatly held a small, unconnected, but thoroughly air-tight deep-freeze unit. Yes, Stanley Ainsworth might have been slow to mature; but when he finally set a girl up in an apartment for his own private, though infrequent pleasure, that girl belonged to Stanley Ainsworth and to no one else.

Christine should have realized that.

He had known about Crangle's intrusion for almost a year. Last Saturday evening a well-phrased phone call had brought them to this very room. The small .22 pistol he had acquired during the war years had wiped the slate clean, and restored his dignity. His solo robbery of Stone's Security and Express, using a dead man's key, had been a stroke of genius. Greed had not been any part of his motive.

He had done an undetectable job of removing and replacing the wall panel. There was another small, connected, deep-freeze unit in the opposite corner now. The little clues he had arranged for the police—Christine's supposed setting of the time lock, Crangle's car at the airport, the changed license plates, the lipsticked tissue, the torn piece of air-ticket envelope, the fragment of a

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ten-dollar bill on the floor near the vault—all had been the result of long and profound thought. Still smiling, he switched off the lights and went upstairs to his study.

He locked the door and went directly to the bookshelves. He removed a leather-bound copy of Edgar Allan Poe's Works, pressed a hidden catch, and swung the end section outward on concealed hinges. He drew one of two bulging suitcases from the recess, carried it to his desk, unlocked it, and flung back the lid.

For several minutes he stared without emotion at approximately $200,000 in sheafed bills of various denominations. Then a frown creased his pale brow. He liked money, he liked working with money—but this? It was too much, an excess galling to his sensitive nature. He wanted no part of it; yet he couldn't return it now. Responsible people must have a convincing reason for disappearance.

He replaced the money in its secure nook and gazed around the study as if seeing it for the first time. He recognized a growing discontent for what it was. Harris was right. He should marry. There was a need in him now. The excitement of murder, the sweetness of revenge, had roused him to a fullness that Christine Blydon had never been able to do even in their most intimate moments.

Harris had spoken highly of Mrs. Crangle. Did he not have a debt to pay there? It was not, as he had said, right for the innocent to suffer. He must make reparation, offer his home, his life, for the faithless one he had taken away. In all conscience it was the decent thing to do.

Would Sunday afternoon, he wondered, be too soon to drop around and express his deep regret? Discreetly, of course.

And now take up the story again . . .

He had done an undetectable job of removing and replacing the panel. There was another small, connected, deep-freeze unit in the opposite corner now. The little clues he had arranged for the police—Christine's supposed setting of the time lock, Crangle's car at the airport, the changed license plates, the lipsticked tissue, the torn piece of air-ticket envelope—all in all had been the result of long and profound thought.

How handy the common handkerchief was! It kept

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incriminating fingerprints from overlapping those of the second-last employee on a shiny handle when one closed the vault for the weekend. How cunningly the changed license plates had fixed the police minds on nonexistent trails! Harris was right in only one thing: gloves had been worn during the actual robbery.

After the excitement of Saturday night and a keyed-up Sunday some impatience was natural, some anxiety bound to creep in. Also, there was a certain tension in knowing that two employees would not report for work on Monday, though anxiously expected by others. It was a pressure on the mind and he had submitted to the impulse to add a "clue."

No one had seen him tear a corner from a ten-dollar bill and drop it on the floor. They would have noticed a whole bill or a paper band—large pieces drew the eye. He had drawn their eyes when he backed away, astounded. How swiftly that fragment had sped the police in gainless pursuit!

Still smiling, he switched off the lights, climbed upstairs to his study, locked the outside door, then went directly to the bookshelves. He removed a leather-bound copy of Edgar Allan Poe's Works, pressed a hidden catch, and swung the end section outward on concealed hinges. He was reaching for one of two bulging suitcases in the recess behind when the downstairs doorbell pealed, twice in succession.

His gasp was more of annoyance than apprehension. Frowning, he closed the section, replaced the book, and went to answer the door.

To his amazement it was Lieutenant Harris with another man. "I hate to bother you, Stanley," the detective said. "We have to search the house. The—"

"Search the house! But why—what—?"

"Something began to bug me, walking home," Harris said. "It's bugging me yet, that tiny piece of a ten-dollar bill you found on the floor near the vault. If the money was all in neat banded packets, I just don't see how a piece could get torn off accidentally. It would mean gripping, by chance, one single bill and no other. Bare-fingered it's possible. But with gloves on?" He shook his head decisively. "You'd either get a lot of bills or none."

"I—I don't—" Ainsworth's lips clamped shut.

"Paper money is pretty tough," Harris continued. "If a single bill *was* seized in fumbling haste, the band might break or the bill slide free or

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the packet be lifted intact. But it wouldn't tear."

Harris pulled a crumpled bill from his pocket and demonstrated its toughness by tugging it firmly in opposite directions. Each time the bill slipped from the thumbs and fingers of both hands. "Stanley, that fragment was deliberately torn from a bill, deliberately left on the floor!"

"But why?"

"To send us scurrying instantly after two missing people. By a third person who may, or may not, have been working with them. They tried to gain time—our evidence shows that; yet suddenly here's a clue that invites—invites, mind you—immediate pursuit. It doesn't make sense."

Ainsworth caught his breath. "And you suspect me!" he cried. "Good Lord, man! I'm comfortably fixed. I'd have neither need nor desire to steal. Besides, where would I get a key to open the office door? Now that Crangle is gone, only Keeler has a key."

"Good points," Harris conceded. "But as I told you, Keeler is clean—has a solid alibi."

"But the other employees—"

"Are mere workers, with no authority and no key. It's not likely they'd be in on this. Damn it, this seemed such a simple case! Now it's a puzzling one, full of contradictions, and we must consider every possibility." He nodded to the man beside him.

Hearing a rustle of paper, Ainsworth stood aside, helplessly. When Lieutenant Harris searched a house, that house was searched. Keenly Ainsworth wondered which they'd find first—the money or the bodies in the deep-freeze coffin.

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Mary Braund's first story ("What's on the Telly Tonight?" in the October 1972 issue of EQMM) was "a glimpse for American readers of the delights of British TV fare." In her second story Mary Braund gives us a glimpse of American TV, but this time from an entirely different—and novel—view . . .

Barty Wilson became a celebrity in a rather unusual way—not a superstar, not really a star, but certainly a celebrity; and it all had a curious effect on his jealous, mean-spirited wife. . .

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BARTY WILSON?

by MARY BRAUND

Harriet Wilson's husband, Barty, was an actor. You know the name, of course. Even if you are not familiar with the name, you will remember the face. Small, thin, sunken cheeks, deep-set eyes, haggard expression. Barty Wilson is—or was—a character actor, and had been reasonably successful in films and lately on television, playing the role of a henpecked husband in a popular TV series, never quite getting star billing, but making a good living for himself and Harriet. The role fitted him like a glove, because that was the role he played in real life.

Harriet Wilson—Harriet Ellsworthy, that is (stage name)—is, rather was, an actress. Permanently "at liberty," you might say. No one but Harriet can remember the last part she played. Actually, it was in a commercial extolling the virtues of a wonder detergent. Harriet took the part of a mother of eight children who found that this particular detergent was the only one that could get her family's wash clean—they were an extraordinarily dirty family—and that was a role Harriet could play without even rehearsing.

Harriet was a big woman, 160 pounds, with thick arms and a dominating expression.

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She could easily have been a mother of eight children, continually throwing piles of dirty clothes in a washing machine, and maybe that was one reason she was so unkind to poor old Barty. Because they never had any children. She was always telling him how she would have been a famous actress if only she hadn't thrown herself away on a small-bit actor like Barty, eating her way through boxes of chocolates and second helpings of French fries as she complained.

Not that Harriet had always looked like that. When she and Barty were first married, she had weighed a lot less than he did, a slender little thing with a winsome expression that hid a heart of steel, and in those days Barty had admittedly been on the scraggy side. Lean and rangy, his agent had called him, but the studios in Hollywood are full of actors who are lean and rangy, knocking hopefully on their agents' doors. The sunken cheeks and haggard look had come later as the years of marriage with Harriet had grated on, and with the look had come success. However, Barty had spent the early days of his working life serving in hamburger joints and washing up in high-class restaurants.

Harriet had been fairly successful in those days, getting small parts in B films, playing the part of the maid or the receptionist, and all the time haranguing Barty for his failure to make the big time. But Barty was a persistent man, and as Harriet's winsome expression had changed to reveal the disappointment beneath and Barty had got to look more and more like the downtrodden little man, so their roles had changed and it was Barty who got the parts and Harriet who knocked on the agents' doors.

The break came when Barty was given a bit part in the film "High Noon at Black Rock." You remember it, of course. It was a great success, getting the star an Oscar, and some of the gloss rubbed off onto Barty. There came a series of similar parts and then one day a new quiz game started on television, and Barty's agent insisted that Barty audition for it. "Stars and Their Future." A silly program, really, but for some reason it caught the popular imagination and Barty revealed a fine dry wit, honed by years of Harriet's company. Everyone loved him—everyone, that is, except Harriet.

"What sort of thing is that for an actor to be doing?" she had demanded after they had sat through the first telecast of the new quiz show.

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"Let's face it, Harriet. It's good money and we need the money," Barty answered, downing his third martini and watching himself with satisfaction.

"But you're not acting," she persisted. "You're just playing." She took a breath. "You're just playing yourself."

"Nothing wrong with that, is there?" Barty retorted. "Lucky to be getting paid for being oneself, I'd say."

Harriest gobbled another chocolate. "Well, if that's what they want, a scrunched-up little man who's no good as an actor, I suppose you're right." She watched malevolently as Barty made his mild little jokes, and she did not laugh with the studio audience.

"It will never last," she predicted that first night.

However, the months went by and the show continued. When the network took it off for a short time, the public demanded its return. Barty began to get fan mail and Harriet went to a health spa. She lost fifteen pounds, then went back to see her agent. He spread his hands hopelessly.

"You know how it is these days, Harriet. They want someone with a bit of, well, sex appeal. Experience doesn't count for anything any more."

"Sam," she said. "When I used to come to you years ago, you said they didn't want young things, they wanted someone who knew the craft."

"You know how it is, Harriet. Times change. Believe me, I'll let you know just as soon as anything turns up."

"Yeah, Sam, I know. Don't call me, I'll call you."

As time went on, Barty became quite a celebrity around the country. He was invited to talk to women's clubs, he got several parts in films and TV specials, and became a favorite on late-night talk shows. He was not a star exactly, but he became a household name.

You would have thought Harriet would be pleased to have a regular paycheck coming in, to move from the apartment in downtown Los Angeles with no air conditioning to the ranch house out in the hills with a swimming pool and a trip once to New York and once to Honolulu. But she could not forgive Barty for having made his name that way.

"I don't understand it," she said. "You've no talent, that's obvious. Now I know the business. Why is it that I'm sitting at home while you're out there with the masses adoring you. It's not as though you are even good-looking."

"Some people think I'm not too bad," Barty said, on one of

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the few evenings he was home.

"And what does that mean, I'd like to know?" Harriet had a trick of raising her eyebrows in an arch manner that was particularly infuriating.

Barty grinned over his martini. "Like to know, Harriet? We've been married a long time, you and me, and there are still things you don't know about me."

So Harriet decided to find out. She could hardly believe that anyone would find poor old Barty the least bit attractive, but she'd already been proved wrong about the TV show and she found she was just as wrong about Barty's attractiveness to the opposite sex. After all, Barty was making a good income these days, so there was money to throw around, and eventually she tracked it down to where he was throwing it.

There was an assistant studio manager, a little blonde girl, fluffy and not too bright in Harriet's estimation, but it seemed she and Barty had been seen around in some of the smarter spots in L.A. The girl had a certain winsome expression that struck a chord in Harriet's mind and she was sure it was striking a chord in Barty's.

When she totted up the out-of-town trips he had been taking and the late nights he had been keeping, she was ready to tackle him. She hadn't been through the thin times to see it all go out the window on some little blonde with not too much between her ears.

It was one of those hot sticky nights in Southern California when she came to grips with Barty. He was inclined to shrug the whole thing off. "After all, Harriet, you and I haven't exactly been a loving couple for the past few years, have we? I can't see why you are making a fuss now."

He refilled his glass again, for about the fifth time during the argument.

"You're just a dirty little lecher. No good as an actor, never made it as a father, and now it turns out you're no good as a husband." She was infuriated beyond reason.

"Oh, come on, Harriet. You'll get something out of it. I'll give you this house."

"So that you can marry that dumb blonde? And leave me stranded? After I've thrown away my career looking after you? Why, who knows what I could have been if I hadn't devoted myself to building you up into what you are today?"

One thing about Barty, he had a sense of humor. He started to laugh, choking on his

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drink, and the sight of Barty laughing under the stars on the warm California night was more than Harriet could take. She gave him an almighty shove and he fell backward, drink still in hand, into the swimming pool.

The pool was there mainly for show. Barty couldn't swim, and though Harriet was really quite a strong swimmer, she didn't care to do too much exercise these days. So she stood at the side of the pool and watched Barty floundering in the water, going under and coming up two or three times until he disappeared under and stayed there. His martini glass was still clutched in his hand, and it was doubtful if he ever knew what happened to him.

Harriet did wonder about his will—if he had had time to change it or even to make one; but as she stood and thought about it, it was too late and Barty Wilson was gone forever, off the silver screen, off the flickering TV sets, out of Harriet's life, and out of the fluffy blonde's life, too.

As it turned out, Barty had never made a will, so everything went automatically to Harriet. It was quite a considerable amount. Harriet had to acknowledge that Barty had done better for himself than she had ever imagined. There was the house, bought and paid for, a sizable amount stashed away in the bank and some very good investments that Barty must have made with the help of professional advice. Yes, she was very well pleased with Barty, now that he was dead and gone, no longer interrupting her career, no longer making her trail around town tracking down his love affairs. Good old Barty!

It suited Harriet to stay on in the house—it was cool up there in the hills, and all the time the place was appreciating in value. Somehow, though, it seemed—well, empty in the days after Barty's sad "accident." The sprinklers ran on the lawn and the blinds were pulled down against the fierce California summer. The house was dim and hushed, Harriet could hear her own feet thudding on the thick wall-to-wall carpets as she padded backward and forward from one room to another, clearing Barty's things out of the closets, planning the trips she would take—Las Vegas maybe, or Palm Springs or anywhere with a breath of life.

She switched the TV on for a bit of company, not to watch it so much as to have the sound of another voice in the house. Maybe, after all, the house was too big for her alone, maybe she should take a look at one of

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those condominiums that lined the beach. They were expensive, but she had enough money to do what she liked.

She was gathering together an armful of Barty's clothes to take down to the second-hand store where you got a percentage of the sales price, when she suddenly stopped dead in her tracks, whirling around to look at the TV. She couldn't believe her ears or her eyes.

There on the screen in "Stars and Their Future," cracking his little jokes, was Barty, for all the world as though he was still around and not lying in his grave this past month.

Harriet was incensed. What execrable taste these television people had, showing the program like that, not even mentioning that poor old Barty had passed on. What about the millions of people around the country who must be grieving over Barty, never mind her own feelings? She broke out in a gentle sweat and switched the TV off abruptly, then just as quickly switched it back on again. She found herself sitting in the chair, her arms full of Barty's suits, watching bemused as the camera flickered onto his face, then away, then back again. She was not listening to what was being said, just watching the expression on his face, looking for a hint that perhaps he knew what was going to happen to him.

"Macabre nonsense," she muttered to herself as the program ended with the usual string of commercials. The house settled in around her again.

After a few days the place began to get on her nerves. If only someone would call up, or come and visit; but Harriet had never had any real friends. Such friends as they had had been Barty's. She began to feel quite sorry for herself and on an impulse she called her sister Margaret who lived in the wilds of Kansas and whom she hadn't seen for years. She and Margaret had never been close, not even as children, and on an even more sudden impulse she found herself inviting Margaret to come and stay.

"Harriet," her sister's voice said at the other end of the line, "I'd love to, but you know how it is with me. I can't afford a ticket to Los Angeles. In any case, I couldn't leave the children." Margaret had been divorced for years and her children were now teen-agers. It had been a struggle for her to make ends meet these past few years. "But otherwise it would be a treat to come and see you again, Harriet, and talk over old times."

Harriet didn't believe that

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for a minute, but her desire for company was too strong. "I'll pay for your ticket," she said.

"What about the children, though?"

Harriet groaned. "All right, I'll pay for them, too."

So they came, filling her house with noisy teen-age laughter, splashing in the pool, treading wet feet and dripping bodies across her nice carpet, drinking gallons of pop and eating their way through mountains of hot dogs and hamburgers, potato chips and cookies. Harriet began to see the virtue of never having had a family.

Margaret sat back in the comfortable chairs and endlessly compared Harriet's life with her own and insisted they take in all the sights of L.A. They made a trip to Disneyland and bus tours around Hollywood and it all cost Harriet a heap of money.

Margaret also deemed it a mark of respect to the children's uncle by marriage that they should sit through every showing of "Stars and Their Future" and as that was the only time Margaret was completely silent, Harriet began to welcome the respite. She had forgotten that anyone could talk so much about so little.

It was also Margaret who pointed out to Harriet that a downtown movie theater was showing one of Barty's old films—a second feature, of course—and insisted that Harriet and the kids should go along and see it. "After all, Harriet, he's famous now, being dead and all that." Which didn't exactly please Harriet, but she went nonetheless and found herself quite comfortable in the theater, the popcorn passing between the kids as Barty played the part of the manager of a seedy hotel, screwing his eyes up against the smoke of a persistent cigarette in the old familiar way.

"Lovely, isn't it?" said Margaret as they emerged from the movie house, "being able to see Barty again like that, just as though he was in the world with you still. Must be a great comfort to you, Harriet."

Harriet snorted, but half-heartedly. There *was* something oddly comforting about the sight of Barty walking and talking his way around the screen, his scraggy old face looming up above her head. Who would ever have thought she would be glad to see that face again?

The summer vacation came to an end and the kids had to get back to school in Kansas. With relief Harriet took them all to the airport, and was glad to have the house to herself

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once more without the bother of fixing those endless meals for the ravening horde.

In fact, it was a chore to fix meals at all—she had somehow lost her appetite for food. It was easier to snack on crackers and cheese, washing them down with the neat vodka that she had begun to like, and though it was peaceful without Margaret's continual chatter and the inane giggling of the children, the house was very empty once again. She ate less and less and drank more. The pounds began to drop away from Harriet.

She found she was waiting each week for "Stars and Their Future," at a loss to know what to do with herself at the program's end. Then she discovered that "High Noon at Black Rock" was playing at one of the drive-in movies out in the sticks, so she drove out there one Monday evening, sitting alone in her car, waiting for the five minutes of Barty's appearance. She went back every night for the rest of the week.

It was with a feeling akin to despair that, tuning in for the usual episode of "Stars and Their Future," she found Barty's seat on the panel filled by a stranger. She phoned the local station indignantly, without giving her name. "Oh, yes, ma'am," the bored voice said, "all the prerecorded programs with Barty Wilson have been used up now. We won't be seeing him again."

For the first time Harriet could remember, she found herself shedding a few tears.

"That's it," she said to herself. "I must pull myself together." She packed a bag and drove off across the desert to Las Vegas. "A bit of the bright life, that's what I need." She talked to herself quite frequently these days.

She meant to play the tables and it was quite by accident that she discovered one of the theaters off the main drag showing a rerun of yet another of Barty's old movies, this one where he had a better part, on the screen much of the time; and so, instead of wasting her money gambling, she spent most of each day in the movie theater.

At the end of each day she went back to the hotel with her bottle of vodka. When the end of the week came, and the show changed, she got in her car and drove off to Palm Springs. She had lost the urge for the gambling tables and the lavish floor shows.

She checked into a motel in Palm Springs and there she found they were still showing the old episodes of "Stars and Their Future." She stayed for six weeks, until that too came

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to an end and Barty's chair was filled by the stranger.

Back in the house on the hill in L.A. she sat for a week. wondering what to do next, and then the phone rang. It was an event for the phone to ring. Of all people it was her almost-forgotten agent, Sam.

"Harriet," he said, "I've got just the part for you. Tailor-made. Get yourself down to my office as fast as you can. It's your big chance, baby. When the specifications came in, I just knew you were the right person. The lean years are over, Harriet."

There was no denying she was excited, but somehow not as excited as she should have been. Sam wouldn't tell her what the part was, except that it was on a new TV series, and though she tried to project herself back into the world of the bright lights and action, it had been too long. She had been alone for all those months since Barty died, with not enough people to talk to, with nobody to work her tongue on.

She searched through her closets for the right thing to wear, but nothing seemed to fit any more; all her clothes hung loosely on her. She dawdled with the idea of going out to buy something new, but she felt comfortable in her old clothes and by scrunching in her belt and arranging the folds around her lean hips so that the dress was no longer spread out over her once ample waist, she felt she would pass. Time enough to get new clothes after she got the part.

Sam's face fell when she walked into his office. He looked her up and down, distress all over his fat face. "Harriet," he said despairingly, "what's happened to you?"

Sam's question was merely rhetorical. She knew what had happened to her. "What do you mean, Sam?"

He groaned. "You've gotten so thin," he said. "They want a beefy middle-aged woman to play the dominating mother figure. Look at you. Last time I saw you, you were perfect for the part."

There was a full-length mirror in Sam's office, tucked away between the filing cabinets. Harriet stood in front of it and really looked at herself for the first time in months. She seemed taller, definitely skinny, her old clothes bedraggled on her, her cheeks thin and sunken, with great dark rings under her eyes, eyes that were dark and solemn. She looked and looked and then began to laugh, the laughter choking her.

"Sam," she said at last, "don't you see a resemblance?"

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Sam was sucking on a fresh cigar, riffling through the papers on his desk.

"Resemblance? To what?"

"Why," said Harriet, "I look like Barty." And she laughed some more.

Sam was not amused. "I'll let you know," he said.

Somehow Harriet did not mind too much. Somewhere along the line her amibiton had died. Without Barty to nag, life didn't seem the same. Without him to harass, to get fat for, to grumble over, to complain to, it just didn't seem worthwhile. The money stayed in the bank, the house on the hill deteriorated, the grass grew high, the parts never came in, the phone never rang.

Harriet found a detective agency that expressed no surprise at her strange request. They were to search the local papers, nation-wide, and find out which movie theaters or TV stations were showing old Barty Wilson films. Harriet traveled the country, spending a week here and a week there in one-horse towns where the local theaters or the TV stations were showing old movies that Barty had made five, ten years before, her bottle of vodka always with her, the swimming pool back in L.A. growing algae.

The end came in Green Bay, Wisconsin. It was a bitter night, 15° below, and after the sparse audience had filed out, the ushers found Harriet, hunched in her seat, empty vodka bottle on the floor beside her, face gray and sunken, already cold to the touch, her eyes wide-open and fixed where the screen had been. Tattered curtains, twenty years' old, swished over the yawning space.

"Who is she?" someone asked, thumbing through her purse.

"God only knows." The manager of the theater shrugged. "And who cares? Just get her out of here quick. These old Barty Wilson movies are getting to be quite a cult these days. We don't want any old drunk, fan or no fan, queering the pitch."

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Here are the 404th and 405th "first stories" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. . . The author sent in two "first stories," and since we liked them both and couldn't tell which was the first "first" and which was the second "first," we decided to give you both, back to back in the same issue.

The first "first" is a tale of fishing and industrial espionage "It has been written that the arts of fishing and espionage are close kin," but "in fishing and espionage there is much that only heaven knows." A grand debut in print!

The author, MacLean O'Spelin (a pseudonym), whose age is autobiographically indicated as "mature," has been, in chronological order, a bellhop, waiter, bar boy, warehouseman, student, soldier, and an "employee of the U.S. Foreign Service." His interests include fishing, golf, and following the affairs of international finance and industry; he has more than a passing interest too in art, history, architecture, and archeology.

Mr. O'Spelin is a grand prospect for our genre. He already has a style of his own, and we suspect he can write a blue streak. . .

THE YELLOW HAMMER

by MacLEAN O'SPELIN

"I've got to have more help," I told Martin Locke over late-night brandy in my cabin overlooking the Eel River. "So I'm going to advertise in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.*"

"Good. Stress the chance to make a nice chunk of money."

"No, that's the wrong tack. *EQMM* readers are a special breed—the sporting instinct, not greed, is the nerve to touch."

"Lofty sentiment, Mac. Does you credit. But remember, the finest sport on earth is making money."

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Martin's faults are many, believe me, but his iron-gray head is packed with common sense. Actually, money *does* cast a spell. I'll try not to give offense, but I think I'd better try to touch the fiscal nerve as well.

This, then, is in essence a Help Wanted ad and I want to avoid putting off the squeamish. With luck a Yellow Hammer can be an agent of death, but it is not a blunt instrument. It had better *not* be blunt. It is a trout fly.

For God's sake, you say, a fish story? In *EQMM?* Wait, please. This Yellow Hammer did figure in a crime. Not heinous, in my view, but selling valuable property not incontrovertibly one's own is, I suppose, larcenous.

I'll be frank. Involved here are espionage and steelhead fishing in the Far West as well as tidy sums of money. And, in the off-stage shadows, a possible ten years in prison.

Swampy territory, you say. Agreed. Let me sketch the background. My name you see above. Irish on my father's side, Scottish on the distaff.

Good Lord, you complain, a little background is okay—but a life history?

Agreed again. But I wanted to make it clear that my obsession with fishing—yes, I recognize it for what it is—is genetically come by. Not my fault.

I am a fly angler. Congenitally. Both my grandfathers begrudged time stolen from streamside by irrelevancies (*steady employment*) and so do I. But, even though I curb unimportant extravagances, the overhead, the dollar drain is cruel.

I lease a splendid stretch of fishing on the River Tweed and, I assure you, the Scots can squeeze *your* dollar as tightly as their own pence. I own well appointed fishing cabins on the Eel, the Firehole, and the Kisipox—Americans and Canadians are talented squeezers, too. I pilot my own airplane (Piper Seneca) and I maintain a base of operations, a *pied-a-terre*, in inflation-stricken San Francisco. All outgo, no income.

So, for profession, I chose freelance industrial espionage. It is a growth industry, I have flair and I get results, and my fees are calculated in kilo-dollars.

Scarcely uplifting, you say. Far less ignoble, I say, than many another service industry. Why, I know bankers and brokers who—but I digress.

The profession carries pluses: I can refuse assignments that conflict with fishing

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seasons. As a psychic bonus, opportunities abound to hob-nob, albeit clandestinely, with that interesting and worthwhile class, the Chief Executive Officer (long ago I learned to deal solely with the top man, the CEO).

It has been written that the arts of fishing and espionage are close kin. Possibly. My own rule has always been to keep the two completely separate. But I broke that rule and that, fundamentally, is why I now need help.

That is who and why I am. To specifics: you will have seen the spate of excited feature stories on the Wankel rotary engine. Noteworthy, I think, is that while the CEOs of our automotive Big Three (plus one) mutter in print about difficult-to-solve-in-less-than-five-years technical imperfections, almost never do they publicly mention the Japanese-made rotaries (Mazdas) already burning up our nation's roads.

Is this reticence a late-blooming manifestation of the ignore-the-foreign-imports-they'll-go-away syndrome that cost the Big Three so dearly before? Only partly. These CEOs command upwards of 500K per annum. Despite appearances, *no* man who can contrive to draw down half a million a year can be witless.

No, behind that calm façade, a desperate race, a catch-up derby for big stakes is being run. In the executive suite it is no fun watching the Mazdas go by.

Behind-the-scenes action is my arena and I kept an eye on the situation even while pursuing bonefish and barracuda in Florida. On the day my checkbook gave its too familiar warning of approaching illiquidity, I sighed and, reluctantly, packed up my fly rods (handcrafted Holbrooks) and set up a clandestine meeting with the CEO of a great company which, you will understand, must remain nameless.

CEOs with enough gumption to take mistresses choose them beautiful, common-sensical, and discreet. So when John LNI (Last Name Irrelevant) suggested that the New York penthouse of his French-born mistress was safer than most safehouses, I agreed. And, I confess, penthouses with *deluxe* contents intrigue me.

The New York night was chilly, John's greeting warm. "Mac, old son of a gun, long time no see." An MBA from the Harvard B-school, a gracious man who once visited Dallas and, shocked, has not ventured west of Detroit since, John has

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the idea that this manner of speech puts Westerners at ease.

"Ol' hoss," I said as bluffly as I could manage, "you look frisky as a cayuse with a belly fulla locoweed." Far from inspired, but I like John and I try to repay a courteous gesture with one of my own.

"You remember Helene, I'm sure," he said fondly as she came toward us.

Indeed I did. Helene does not have *je ne sais quoi*, she has I know *quoi*. Gamine elegance, if you will excuse a paradox. I bowed over her hand and kissed it. Continental extravagance, but appropriate, I felt, in her case.

I studied her figure as she made drinks for John and me. Slender, subtly provocative—a decorative woman, a work of French art like the Rouault on the wall behind her. When she handed me my glass she looked into my eyes just *un peu coquette*. Have you ever gazed into a campfire flickering beside a trout stream?

Please don't misconstrue this. Frenchwomen are like that. Means nothing. John is strong, considerate, has a CEO's dignified good looks. She loves him, belongs to him. Money enters into it, of course, but not crassly. Her beauty glows best against a backdrop of big money. Fiscal prudence is proverbially French, true, but there is nothing crass about prudence.

I digress again, you complain. Not really. Watching her reminded me vividly that there were no penthouses, no Rouaults, no Helenes in my life. But broadened interest would require more kilo-dollars. I resolved to work harder—more often, rather. And to hike the price on John.

After a moment or two of pleasant small talk she left us to our business and I sketched my theory of outward calm, inward turmoil in the automobile industry.

John nodded gravely. "But we are finally awake and what the Press calls the Wankel Derby is off and running. I hope and expect to win and I have publicly predicted an American-made rotary car on the road before the end of 1974. But, MacLean, privately I am far less sanguine. There are problems."

"I can help, John."

"That is why you and I are here tonight. You see, we have built rotary prototypes and they operate with precision—to about thirty thousand miles. Then excessive wear shows up. Somewhere there is imbalance. So the question: did the Japanese jump the gun or have they the answer to the problem?"

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"And if they have, you want it."

"Exactly. My engineers have torn down dozens of those Japanese toys"—John, irretrievably, is a big-car man—"and they have isolated the problem components." Rising, he crossed to a cherrywood table (Queen Anne, authentic, lovely) and opened the shallow drawer a crack; then, with an almost sheepish smile, he said something about seeing if Helene needed anything and left the room.

Unnecessary clandestine trappings, but espionage has an oddly universal fascination; highly placed men love to play *l'espion*. If their amateurism does not seem dangerous, I play along. A client who thinks he is participating—safely—is a happy client.

Actually, John had no worries; betrayal is not my style. And that coin has another side: cross any CEO and he will cheerfully arrange your emasculation, vocationally speaking. Fair enough; there may be little honor among spies themselves but double dealing a client is the unsoundest of business practices.

Quickly I took the swatch of technical drawings and notes from the drawer and photographed them with my specially designed Minox. In San Francisco, before I took off for Japan, I would make enlargements, memorize the pertinent information, and destroy all prints and negatives.

When John returned I was standing before the Rouault, basking in its somber glow (and feeling a tiny stab of envy, I confess). He nodded slightly when he saw that the drawer of the Queen Anne table was now closed tightly.

He offered me another drink, but I refused. It was bargaining time.

I started high. He began low. I respect John, but I think it demeans a man to haggle like a jalopy dealer. All CEOs do it, I don't know why.

Back and forth, back and forth, the process complicated by our tacit understanding that no direct mention must be made of the name of our game—specifics can be implied, but can never be stated. But eventually we agreed on 76K, contingent on my furnishing photographs of the exact data John's engineers needed. A fair price—all expenses would be mine, and I was gambling that the Japanese actually had solved the problem. If not, I would be out of pocket many, too many, kilo-dollars. Espionage is no cheap-jack profession, you understand.

Wearily I accepted a night-

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cap. Haggling tires me to the bone.

Helene returned for the *au revoirs*. Fatigue fled as I kissed her hand again. One way to express it would be: wow—*sotto voce*.

In Tokyo, three days later, it was raining. In Tokyo everything takes time. Business deals, even clandestine, can only be consummated to the accompaniment of gallons of ceremonial tea, much bowing, quarts of ceremonial *sake*, dozens of not so ceremonial geishas. But, like fishing, espionage rewards patience and I have schooled myself to enjoy side issues—even Tokyo's rain and manic traffic.

So I had plenty of time to indulge in visions of Rouaults and of women-like-Helene. I admire articles of top quality but, except for angling-related items, own none. Something of a monadic existence, mine. Did it need broadening? I was beginning to think so.

Personal connections, not electronic circuitry, are the keys to successful espionage and my Japanese connections are solid, if *sub rosa*. I probed here, cajoled there, bribed here and there, and eventually uncovered the right man. He had access to the right information—the Japanese had, it seemed, solved the problem—and he produced it, neatly reduced to two microfilms. Then, over *sake*, we haggled. Interminably. It cost me 14K. More than I wanted to pay, less than I thought I'd have to.

After he bowed and took the cash and bowed and handed me the negatives he warned me, sucking in air in sibilant apology, that this had to be a once-only transaction. New security rules were to be instituted the next week in the factory's R&D Division, the unwitting donor of the data now in my hands.

A bit late. *Sayonara*.

I telephoned John from San Francisco. Elated, he said he would send "a trusted emissary to receive the product." I needed a breather and in a tidy blend of security and serenity we chose my cabin on the Eel as the meeting place.

His son, John said, would be free in three days and needed "to learn every facet of the business." Fine. Ripening CEOs, too, are a worthwhile class to cultivate.

Then John proposed breaking off the call and resuming it the following day on a different telephone. An amateur's precaution, but I humored him.

I had never met John's son, so I telephoned the next day to

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give directions to my cabin. I also named and described a trout fly. John got the point without my spelling it out: his son was to mention the name of the fly to me, whereupon I would produce one. Result—each of us would know that the other was who he said he was. Simplicity itself, and effective.

No, not Yellow Hammer. Any young stranger might innocently mention that well-known fly to me—such things happen, with tragic-comic results. I tie my own flies, so I picked MacDragon, a pattern I designed and known only to one or two favored friends. MacDragon is a killer of resident rainbow trout, those that do not migrate. Oddly, it is ineffective for those rainbow that do go to sea, returning to their native streams to spawn two years later, grown to heroic size—steelhead. Not all rainbow trout do this, perhaps heaven knows why. In fishing and espionage there is much that only heaven knows.

Before leaving for the Eel I reduced the two microfilm negatives by a factor of ten and, using a good-sized hook (No. 2, Sproat), tied the two tiny film chips under the thick body of a Yellow Hammer. Finally, eh?

I was breaking my own rule by mixing profession with obsession, but, I reasoned, essentially the assignment was completed. Still, being safe not sorry is fundamental. My profession is lucrative and the faintest rustle of kilo-dollars is heard by men who style themselves industrial counter-spies. Hijackers. Thieves.

Film chips are far easier to conceal than microfilm but they are pesky. They can get lost, literally, under a fingernail. Using the Yellow Hammer solved the problems of concealment and safe keeping. Leaving only one problem: identification of the fly. Yellow Hammer is a fine steelhead fly and my fly box always holds several. Their heads were the traditional black, so I made this one's head distinctive using green tying thread (Insect Green, size 00). Last problem solved.

Cold, always clear, the Eel tumbles through gorges, glides over rocks and polished sand, winds through groves of redwoods. Always a delight, the Eel, even when, as this time, the steelhead ignore every fly offered. I had two days to wait but, for once, was content to laze the time away, debating drowsily but seriously whether to substitute Albert Marquet, painter of the Seine, for Rouault. Great artists both—maybe the woman-like-Helene should decide. And, where

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Helen's hair was dark, I thought I would prefer my woman-like-Helene's hair to be the color of wild thyme honey.

Some dedicated angler, you scoff. I can only offer this small extenuation: the flesh of that fine fly-rod fish, the grayling, tastes of wild thyme.

So it was almost dreamily that I was flipping a Black Optic fly in Sunnybank Pool just below the bluff from Garberville when I heard footsteps crunch behind me. It was no real surprise to turn and recognize Martin Locke. He is a fly angler and the Eel is true fly water. His thatch of graying hair, his erect figure blend perfectly with his effortless casting—I hope you have seen an expert fly-rod man in action. If not, make the opportunity. Poetry, sheer poetry.

"Good to see you again, Mac," he said affably. "Any luck?"

Skill is required, but anglers speak only of luck. There may be—are—dark forces, capricious gods, in attendance and talk of skill is offensive.

"Zero. Some beauties rolled, though."

"Same with me." He was pretending to tinker with his reel (a Hardy) and I eyed him warily. Much as I respect the man's casting and the masterly way he plays a fish, Martin has a fatal flaw. His profession.

That anyone intelligent, anyone civilized, could become an industrial counterspy shakes my faith in the dignity of man. Especially if he is good at it.

"Thought you were in New Zealand," I said, wishing he still were.

His gaze was bland. "Heard your backcast developed a hitch. Old fishing partner in trouble, naturally I dropped everything and came running."

I had to laugh. My backcast is silken; for years he has tried to match it.

"Been trying Pacific King," he said. "Thinking of trying MacDragon."

Damn! Damn all amateurs! That meant Martin, just on spec, had had a tap on one of John's telephones. By making that second call I had switched right into it and he had heard about my cabin, about MacDragon.

I can outfish Martin. I can keep a professional step ahead of him. But never do I underestimate him; probing was in order. I found a boulder, sat down, and produced sandwiches, cognac, and fly box from my fishing vest. "My flack fly got nothing and Pacific King is pretty drab. What about something bright?"

"Why not, a bit of color might annoy the rascals, make

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'em snap." Refusing my offer of food and brandy, he picked up my fly box. Not a breach of etiquette between fishing partners and I'd known he'd do it, but all the same—

"These red and gold ones look like MacDragons." They were. "Like to try one," he went on, all open honesty. "Heard it's a killer."

"Help yourself." I smiled. "It's been lucky." But not for steelhead.

Then, chilling my heart, he picked up the Yellow Hammer. "Green head," he mused. "Interesting. New wrinkle. What made you think of it?"

Ignoring the question, I drove away the chill with a sip of brandy. "Look, you try MacDragon, I'll try Yellow Hammer. Best fish wins two K."

Geniality gone, greed showing. He studied me and I could read his mind. Double bluff or triple, he was wondering. He guessed wrong. "One K."

"Done." Hiding my relief, I took the Yellow Hammer. The way he was handling himself meant he wasn't sure what he was after, wasn't working for the Japanese. But he knew I had something going and he intended to cut himself in. He has a code of behavior, does Martin, but it is elastic.

Tying on the MacDragon, he waded out and began casting. He knew that somehow MacDragon figured in my dealings with John and, once out of sight, he'd look that fly over microscopically. But the Yellow Hammer, now safely tied to my leader, bothered him, too—was its green head significant or simply a fly tyer's whim?

A sudden thrashing in the river. Not fifty yards away Martin's Hardy sang and his slender rod bent into a throbbing parabola. The steelhead jumped. Twelve pounds, I estimated, if an ounce.

Eight times that fish leaped. Magnificent. It gave Martin a fierce slashing battle and when he finally beached it I couldn't help calling, "Classic work." For it had been. "Ought to go ten pounds, anyway."

He held it up, shimmering in the sun. "Bit over twelve, more likely."

Half a pound over, on my pocket scales. He grinned. "Great fly."

My fly, *my* creation. I prayed he did not realize how deeply that sank the iron into my soul. He glanced sidelong and said, "Going to fish or cut bait?"

Unoriginal, I agree. But said to a man who hasn't used bait since he was six it had another dimension. Seething, I waded into the river. Yes, I knew he

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was only trying to provoke a useful reaction, but I'd had enough of him. *And* amateur spies *and*, irrationally, MacDragon—but that blasted fly had never once produced a steelhead for me, its designer. I splashed off downstream.

Across and down, a steelhead rolled indolently. Head, then dorsal fin, then tail. Lunker! My breath always catches at such a sight. Ah, now I was going to relish taking that thousand from Martin!

No, I had not forgotten the Yellow Hammer. You see, rivers are my element. With a Tonkin-cane rod in my hand I am the master, the king. And, good as he was, Martin could not wing out enough line to reach that fish. But, by God, I could.

My timing perfect, the rod alive in my hand, I shot extra yards of line at precisely the right moment. The fly dropped lightly, above and beyond where the lunker had risen. The line bellied, curving the fly downstream. Zam!

My reel sang its own lovely song. The great fish leaped. Straight up—full shining silver length. Back into the river the heavy body crashed and my heart hit the back of my throat. Trophy size! Maybe a fly-rod record! In an agony of excitement I snubbed the line to gain control.

My rod bowed. The line shook as if electrically charged, then went dead.

My Irish grandfather must have turned face down in his grave. The Scot probably spun in his. You do *not* snub a steelhead. Not with light fly tackle. Break all the other rules if you must, but never that one. Never.

I staggered ashore and sank to the gravel. I could hear the pulse beating in my temples. My hands shook too much to reel in the dead line.

Ridiculous reaction to a lost fish? Not so, not so.

Martin walked up slowly and I could read understanding in his face.

"Twenty pounds," I gasped, my throat tight. "A trophy."

"Eighteen anyway." True sympathy was in his voice. "Damn shame, Mac."

In truth, eighteen was a better guess. Not a record, but still a trophy. Picture it mounted over your mantel. A match for Rouault or Marquet.

The Yellow Hammer! About time, you're thinking. Look. That steelhead would have been the largest of my long career. And I had *snubbed* the line.

Holding my breath, I reeled in. Maybe that fish had thrown the fly—

Not today. Snubbed steel-

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head do not throw flies, they break them off.

The willful gods! Day of disaster! I groped for the cognac.

That evening I paid the bet and took Martin into my confidence. Ruefully he shook his head. "That green head—I should have known, shouldn't have let you outbluff me." Then, wryly, "Partners now, though—a pleasure to team with a man willing to use a fly worth 76K. Gallantry in that gesture, by God."

"Idiocy." No, not the casting of the fly. I'd do that again. But not with my mind fogged by visions of a new life style, visions of French sugarplums and *deluxe* penthouses, not with my mind fuddled by worry over gray-haired hijackers. When you work, work. When you fish, fish. In a word, concentrate.

So I had broken that simple rule and the next day I had to send John's son away carrying back only weak excuses. An image of eye-on-the-ball infallibility is not shatterproof and I shuddered at the thought of John whetting his gelding knife. Quickly I joined Martin at work in riverside.

The Yellow Hammer lodged in the trophy steelhead's jaw, I had told him, was worth 11K delivered—to me. "Eighteen," he said. Back and forth—we closed at 14K. If the gods smile and he lands that fish, he could market it; he, too, cultivates CEOs. But, and I surprise myself, I don't think he will. Hijacking is one thing, poaching quite another. A sportsman, my fishing partner.

Just like any fish story, you say acidly, the big one got away—and no two fishermen can realistically hope to land one particular fish. Ah, but that's the point, there *is* a chance.

Steelhead are tough rugged fish. The spawning urge is inexorable. That lunker will be sulking near where he broke off or upstream nearer the spawning redds, the Yellow Hammer only a minor irritant. The exact location of the tragedy is known, the idea is to fish from there up. But we do need help, your help. Intercede with the temperamental gods. Prayers, incantations (Celtic are good), supplications—anything! If you see American-made rotaries on the road before, say, the winter of 1974, you'll know we won.

Pretty tepid stuff, incantations? Maybe so, and tomorrow I am off for Tokyo again. I can beat those new security rules. But it will cost much time and many, many kilo-dollars.

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You are right, more than magic is needed. Here, then, the meat of this advertisement: Come help in person—twenty of you, thirty, any number. Join Martin—you'll recognize his thatch of iron-gray hair, his classic casting. Bring in that fly, I'll jet back, we'll haggle—tiresome, but the money will perk you up.

Martin and I worked out this next bit over brandy, admittedly, but we will hold to it: we know the risk of ten years in *prison would not deter you*, but let it be said anyway that he and I will front for you, will take all the risk—unless you (forgive me) try to cross us.

You wouldn't know a Yellow Hammer from a hummingbird? See below.

Remember, the Big Three needn't win all the prizes in this race. Come win O'Spelin's own Wankel Derby.

YELLOW HAMMER

Hook: No. 2, Sproat
Tip: Gold tinsel
Tail: Red and white hackle fibers, mixed
Body: Yellow wool, heavy
Ribbing: Gold tinsel
Wings: Red and white bucktail, mixed
Head: GREEN (the color of kilo-dollars)

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In his second "first" Mr. O'Spelin shifts from industrial espionage to a different kind of espionage, the kind that occurs in the twilight of a spy's career. Or, as one of the characters says, "Old soldiers merely fade away while old spies cheerily grow roses in Portugal"—far from the action missions "where the zest is." But what happens when a "spent spy" overhears a narrow-faced young man say to a stunning young woman whom he has never spoken to before: "Senora, the sardine catch was good today, yes?" Ah, the "running with the hounds. . .there is exhilaration in the chase, even for the hunted". . .

THE GOLDEN YEARS

by MacLEAN O'SPELIN

The Golden Years, we are told, begin with retirement at 65. But when Headquarters ordered me Stateside to shove me permanently upstairs, I made up my mind to prospect for that gold much earlier.

"It's a promotion, David, not extinction," the Headquarters people said with weary patience when I kept insisting I was a field operative not a desk man. Sure, I kept saying, I realize someone has to sit behind all these desks, but someone else, not me—no offense, tastes differ, that's all.

Field espionage, they rebutted, is wearing, nerve-fraying—and face it, David, you're no longer a boy. Your knowledge and experience are needed here.

Thank you, I said, but I'd really rather go to seed under the warm sun than under office fluroescents—*dolce far niente*, in fact.

Maybe it'll be sweet doing nothing, they said, or maybe sour. So, go ahead, try it for a while. We'll keep your desk warm, you'll be back.

Not I, said I, and, collecting Diallo, my friend, houseman, and conscience, I took the next flight to Portugal.

I found golden sunshine. I found a small villa with a rose garden. I found old colleagues still congenial. I found bridge —and baccarat at the casino.

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After six weeks I found myself wondering if that desk was still available.

My old friend and intermittent colleague, Alec Bentham, diagnosed my disease. Therapy, he would say, and haul me off to yet another lecture on floribunda roses. This last one had been exhaustive and exhausting *re* mulching and so, before keeping a golf date, he eased his conscience by standing me a drink.

The café, one of his favorites, faced the sparkling bay. On the quay across the street sun-dark fishermen knelt mending their nets. Suburb of Lisbon, fishing village, tourist haven, Cascais was picturesque. Peaceful, too, I thought gloomily.

"Old soldiers merely fade away," Alec was saying. "While"—he took a philosophical sip of Pink Gin—"old spies cheerily grow roses in Portugal."

"Sure," I said. "Spain is great, too. And there's Luc Duchene battling thrips in Tangier—a man who survived seven years undercover in Moscow. Bit of a comedown, you'll admit."

"No doubt our Gallic *compere* finds thrips far less lethal than the KGB," said Alec airily. He would have you believe that, after twenty-odd years in MI-6, he has found the full life in spraying aphids and snipping specimen roses.

"And," I muttered, "old Heinrich Teufel in Marbella—dropping dead while pruning a Gloire de Gehlen. What a way to go."

He chuckled. "German spies never could stand heat. And the Australians can't putt—time for me to give Willerton his weekly thrashing."

As he rose, I saw him glance appreciatively at a woman seating herself at a nearby table and, irritably, I said something about the sanity of carrying a bright cerise raincoat while wearing burnt orange. Alec looked down at me quizzically. "Forget the old days, the dramatic days, dear boy. But do avoid atrophy. The woman is stunning."

Then his face assumed that bland expression that precedes one of the sham quotations it amuses him to invent. Over the years I had worked with him—and against, too, when British and American policies had clashed—I had endured dozens. He made it his exit line: "Ne'er pale the heart, ne'er blue the rose, ne'er sere the rain-scented eglantine."

I had to laugh. Keatsian—just. And Intermezzo, say, or Vielchenblau are roses very

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close to blue. But I got his point. The last few weeks I *had* been heavy on the mood blue. Pale of heart, too.

I was summoning up the energy to leave when a narrow-faced young man entered and paused in the doorway. Then, slowly removing heavy sunglasses, he approached the woman and said in harsh Spanish, "Senora, *por favor*—the sardine catch was good today, yes?"

Suppressing a grin, I studied the woman more closely. Black hair, mid-thirties, attractive I had to admit. I strained for her reply but except for ". . .bridge over the Tagus. . ." I lost it in the rasp of chair legs as the young man sat down. They continued to talk, but inaudibly now.

Thieves, I thought, or spies. Red raincoat on a sunny day, sardines, removal of sunglasses, the Tagus River—recognition signals all. Too many and too bizarre, but contact had been made. Next, I guessed, money would change hands. Right. The man's thin brown fingers crept to the pocket of the raincoat now draped over the a chair and neatly transferred an envelope to his own pocket. Then, chair rasping again, he headed for the rear of the café.

When he returned, he lit a cigarette and, too casually, dropped the pack on the table. Not thieves, then. Professionally run operations have a bureaucratic discipline no criminal will put up with. As I reconstructed it, in the lavabo he had counted the money in the envelope, signed the enclosed receipt, and tucked it into the cigarette pack for the woman to retrieve. Spies, that made them.

I hoped they had an action mission. Stealing secrets is useful and I have accounted for my share. But *action*—the carefully engineered elimination, the almost-bloodless *coup d'etat*—there's where the zest is! Or was.

And here *I* was. Out to pasture but sniffing the air, smelling spies, smelling action. Itching to investigate.

The woman rose, gathered up the raincoat, and confirming my guess, took the cigarette pack. Reluctantly I stayed put when she left. The man was the better bet; whatever their mission, his role would be the more active.

Figuring that Lisbon was more likely than Cascais as the location of his target, I dropped a bill on the table and headed for the municipal parking lot.

Professional knowledge is good background for guessing and I was right again. Sitting in my car, I watched until I

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spotted him coming, his walk the soft glide of the Mediterranean casbahs. I drove out just as he was getting into a Fiat, nondescript but powerful enough for the coastal hills, a good choice.

That prop for a sagging ego, my Porsche, was not. Not new, but still too distinctive for tailing. So it had to be heading. I hit the Lisbon road ahead of him, eased along until his Fiat showed behind. When I saw the hotels that climb the hills of Estoril I opened up for a mile, then swung down the drive of a tourist tower perched on the sea wall. Circling, I stopped where I could watch the Lisbon road—my thought was to tail him through the crowded streets of Estoril, then revert to heading. Two minutes passed. After three I knew—that guess had misfired, the Fiat had turned off.

But there was a chance that the woman had not used a car, so I blistered the road to the Estoril interurban depot. Luck smiled again. The electric from Cascais was just gliding out and I spotted cerise and orange moving toward the taxi rank. This time I played safe and tailed.

The taxi headed back toward Cascais, then turned down the drive of the tourist tower. I nosed the Porsche in, slipped into a vacant slot. In the lobby I watched the woman disappear into an elevator. Burnt orange became her.

I had noted the number of the box the concierge had taken her key from and then I slowly drove the ten miles to Sintra and home. No need to rush. I could take time to savor my small portion of vicarious excitement. One conspirator was safely run to earth and, although I shouldn't have been, I was glad it was the woman.

For Lord Byron, Sintra had had poetic beauty and its Castle of Pena is authentic Oz and, for once, as I turned up the steep driveway, the peaceful charm of my small villa did not irritate me. I shouted to Diallo for a whiskey and soda and went out on the veranda. The sun was burnishing the red roofs below. Swifts and nightjars were carving arabesques above my roses.

Diallo brought my drink. "Allo, *patron.* Your day was good?" In Dakar I had recruited him as an action agent; in Bamako he had recruited me as *patron;* in the years since, we had grown accustomed to each other. He would rather groom the Porsche, hoping to invent an excuse to drive it, but he is an excellent cook and he makes excellent drinks while

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grumbling that the Koran forbids him to associate with alcohol.

A Senegalese Muslim, he also insists that Islamic law prohibits true believers from cultivating flowers with thorns. Complete nonsense, of course. Muslims introduced the rose to Europe. But I do whatever gardening gets done.

When I told him about my two secret agents, his broad black face creased happily at the bungled heading. "Job like that needs expert, *patron*—like Diallo."

He wanted details; so, setting my glass on the wide railing, I obliged, with gestures. Suddenly, just as I was describing the woman, the glass exploded in a spray of liquid and ice. I whirled—but there was nothing in sight but the careening birds.

Vaulting the railing, Diallo dropped lightly into the garden, powered himself over its rock wall. On the road below he hesitated, then at a fast trot disappeared toward town—he'd have been at full speed if he'd spotted anything. I made another drink and set it on the railing. Nothing happened.

Diallo returned, deeply disappointed. I suggested that air pockets in ice sometimes burst, but his idea that a swooping bird had hit the glass full tilt made more sense.

"Could have been a silenced shot," I said, almost wistfully.

"Hope so, *patron*, hope so. But who bother to shoot us?"

Too true. Oddly deflating to realize you are no longer worth being shot at.

To my surprise Alec Bentham and Peter Willerton, the Aussie member of our little colony of spent spies, took a different view. Deciding on dinner in Estoril, I had dropped Diallo in Sintra where he relishes giving the natives a thrill while he consumes Fanta in the cafés. In black trousers and black turtleneck, topped by a red tarboush, he is something to see. The townspeople call him, respectfully, Senhor *Diabo*, and he does not correct them.

Alec would be at the casino, I had figured, probably with Peter, and they would have fun with my new role as counterspy. "Simply not done, old boy," Alec would no doubt say in his best Harrow and Cambridge and money-in-the-family tone.

I found him in the baccarat room. Peter sat across the table, his big face glowing, meaning he had for once taken Alec's measure at golf. And, by the look of his pile of plaques, at baccarat, too.

I waved and he boomed,

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"Drinks on me, Yank. The Pommy's a beaten man."

Smiling a shade thinly, Alec rose. "Respite from the wars, Peter?"

Over dinner, after Peter had illustrated with the salt spoon the delicate bunker shot that had done for Alec on the eighteenth hole, I told them of my spies.

"Tradecraft a bit rough around the edges," agreed Peter. "But recognition signals are hell's own problem. Make a man feel so damn conspicuous."

Alec and I laughed. Peter is big-boned and with his bristly hair seems about seven feet tall. But the two times he and I had worked operations together his size had been no handicap. And the one time we had worked on opposite sides luck, quickly exploited, had been the key element in my beating him out.

"You two want to join the hunt?" I was feeling almost chipper.

Peter shook his head. "Not my style. But it's perking you up, Davey."

Alec gazed at the ceiling. "Who was it said, 'Disturb ye no *l'espion honnette* at meals, games, or at love?' Browning, I fancy."

"Byron said part of it, the best part."

Peter chuckled appreciatively. Then, "Here's what, Davey boy. You hotfoot after the spooks while Alec and I play Central—put you right when you muck it up."

So I told Central about the exploding drink and they theorized quite seriously that no professional counterspies had believed I had really quit the game. Trying to render me *hors de combat* would still be considered part of their daily routine.

Skimpy reasoning, I told them. Keep alert just in case, they said.

Later that night I bribed the concierge at the tourist tower to whisper that the lady in 1117 was appearing in the Corsairs' Lookout on the roof. He pointed to a poster with a photograph and the name Inez.

"*Gracas*," I said drily and he shrugged. Rust in the mental joints already, I thought ruefully. This one Diallo would not hear about.

The Lookout was partially open to the stars and the sea air and Inez was singing *fado*. Then she moved into flamenco, understated but still fiery. She finished with a fragment of Mama Inez, that gaily sinuous classic apparently being her signature. She had style, and the applause recognized it.

I sent her a note saying the

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sardine catch had been excellent and champagne was in order. I signed it Tagus.

When she appeared she was wearing dark red. "*Bon soir*, Monsieur Tagus."

"*Francaise?*" I asked in surprise.

She laughed and said in Spanish, "Oh, no. But in the café I told myself your air of continental world weariness could only be French."

"*Touche.* Boredom, really. Your accent suggests Rome."

"*Chi lo sa?*" Then in English, "Who knows? But the champagne—?" In two minutes, four languages. I was impressed.

After her final numbers we went for a drive along the sea front. She pretended to be impressed by the Porsche and by my driving and I found myself being relieved of the fictional details of my life as a freelance petroleum geologist. She was good. Once I would have given an arm for an agent like her.

We found a café where she had Campari and I drank Spanish brandy that smelled like varnish. I asked her who the young man in Cascais had been and she said, "Someone like you, Tagus, someone with an intelligent interest in sardines."

In repose her face was almost somber but when she smiled there were embers in her dark eyes. "I told that boy he looked, in his glasses, like the younger brother of a sardine. He was hurt."

"Not enough to keep him from stealing your envelope."

"Dear Tagus"—she smiled once more—"sardines dare not steal."

She suggested a nightcap in 1117 and I did not mention it had been a long day. Her sitting room was less waiting-room-modern than I had expected and a pleasant balcony overlooked the estuary of the Tagus. We sat and talked and watched, far below, the lights on unseen craft float out to sea. The brandy was Portuguese, heavy but not harsh. I enjoyed myself but, finally, concealing my weariness, I got to my feet. Near the door was a spectacular bird of paradise plant. "Your flower, Inez. The brilliant colors, the exotic grace equal—Inez."

She laughed merrily. After a second I joined in. It *had* been a mite rich.

"Ah, no," she said. "Those are Inez." A spray of white roses, their perfectly formed blooms a cool contrast to the bird of paradise.

"Iceberg," I said, showing off. "Beautiful example."

"Yes—arctic white, calm, cold. My color."

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"Never." I kissed her cheek. Avuncular.

"Geologist, *boulevardier*, expert on brandy and blossoms—do not stay away, Tagus." Not a chance, I said.

In a way she was right. Her coloring was vivid but there was calm there and cool thought. Plus the embers in her eyes. Humor? Mischief?

As I had written in countless reports: *Rapport established with Subject.* Meaning: Contact made, but sorry no progress yet. Which, in this case, was fine with me. Time was what I had the most of.

By the time I turned up our drive my eyes were blurring with fatigue. Then my stomach began to churn wildly and nausea soured my mouth. I staggered into the house where, before I passed out, Diallo took me in charge.

The sun was painfully high when I came to. Still tasting brandy, I shuddered. Diallo was eyeing me. "Hope everything was worth it, *patron.*"

I groaned. He regards me as *le patron* in the Afro-French sense. He more or less does my bidding, defends my interests, frets some over my well being. In return, I am pretty much responsible for his welfare. An adaptation of the African concept of the mutual obligations of tribal chief and tribesman. But for Diallo the concept does not include sympathy for *le patron's* hangovers.

"I was working," I said feebly. "Mickeyed, maybe."

Grunting at having heard that one before, he left. To make coffee, I hoped.

I had just made it into the shower when the *plastique* blew. *CRACK*-crunch, the walls trembled, the floor seemed to weave, and I heard glass breaking.

Snatching up a towel, I ran to the veranda in time to see the Porsche hurtle down the drive, wheel left, and disappear. Despite myself, I chuckled. Diallo had finally found a solid excuse.

In the house only windows were damaged, but fragments of stone and shrubbery littered the garden. A jagged hole gaped in the wall. Not a heavy charge, but, had it been thrown with precision, enough to have mangled us.

I kicked at the debris. I had been making a minor effort with some McGredy's Yellow Hammers, deep yellow floribundas. Deep yellow, that is, if your luck with Irish-mist-loving floribundas is in. Now I'd never know if mine had been. Wasted, that effort. Pointless targets, roses. I prayed that Diallo

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would nail the *plastiqueur*.

He had. In our front room half an hour later he dumped a limp figure on the tile floor. The narrow-faced man from the café. The sardine.

No identity papers. Nothing found by Diallo in the Fiat but a long-barreled, beautifully crafted target pistol. "Left papers behind while on operation," said Diallo with grudging approval and, with practised force, brought the man to.

I played the soft interrogator, Diallo the hard—like old times, it was. Younger than I had thought, the man was also tougher—the first hour produced only that he was Ahmed al Larbi from Ceuta across the strait from Gibraltar.

Hard and soft, we went, soft and hard—eventually, wet with sweat, he gave more. Yes, he'd spotted me in the café. No, Inez had not told him more than the location of a deaddrop in the hills. There he had found the *plastique*, the pistol, and specific instructions. First, fire a non-lethal ranging shot, a sort of warning shot across our bows. Then, the next day, he was to make a real try at us with the explosive.

But Ceutans don't grow up on throwing games and his arm had been too weak. He was a fine shot, though, and a trier—I liked that. And, as target, I was glad he and his pistol were out of action.

He did not know who Inez' principal was. I believed him—that is what cutouts are for, to protect the principals of an operation. When he balked at identifying his own principal, Diallo gripped his shirt below the throat and twisted. "I tell you this, *cochinillo*. Americans took slaves. French, Spanish, Portuguese took slaves. Who took my people? Arabs, little pig!"

His hand slid up the thin neck and began to squeeze. The whites of Diallo's eyes were streaked with red. A good act, if it was an act.

Larbi struggled weakly. Diallo flung him to the floor.

My turn again. "You'll kill him, for God's sake! He's just a boy!"

Diallo eyed me, his thick chest heaving. Then he shifted his glare to Larbi. "Pig!" He spat the word, swung away and out the door.

I helped Larbi to a chair and found him a cigarette. "Pig of pigs," he whispered, looking at the door. Not inventive, either of them, but there is nothing much worse one Muslim can call another.

"Son," I said quietly, "you had a job to do and you tried to do it. Nothing personal, I know. I was a professional, too."

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He began to respond. A Frenchman—that figured, *plastique* is a Gallic delight—had taken him in tow and begun to train him. He enjoyed the instruction and the practise sessions in Tangier but he longed for real action. When the Frenchman briefed him for his first operation against a live target, he had felt filled with high resolve. Lower now that resolve, but not yet dead—my pressing for his French principal's identity still got only a defiant stare.

"He'll have used a cover name, a throwaway name. Give me that."

I watched him think carefully, then decide he could safely answer. "Colibri."

I relaxed. That name I knew. "Good. That's enough for a while. Maybe I'll even let you go without blowing Colibri. He'd like that."

Gratitude glinted, but was quickly hidden. Promising youngster. Colibri had, as usual, recruited well.

I locked Labri in the cellar. Tomorrow we would collect his papers and put him on a flight to Morocco. I weighed trying to double him—but why ruin the boy? Agents with Larbi's moxie were as rare as Alec's blue roses.

I filled Diallo in. "Clearly a case for Central, *copain.* Get the car."

A gleaming grin. The whites of his eyes were clear again.

"Luc Duchene must have known I'd remember that Colibri was one of his throwaway names," I said to Alec when Diallo and I joined him on his patio, his prize roses blazing around us. "But his point, his main purpose, baffles me."

"Perhaps Luc bears you a grudge," Alec said cheerfully.

"So I beat him on an operation in Brazzaville once. Just a job. Nothing personal. I whipped him once in Dakar, too—you remember, Diallo. But just before he went to Moscow he ruined me in Santiago—beat me fair and square."

"Leaving you, an American, still one up. So sensitive, the French."

"Maybe. But why send a kid, a beginner, up against me here?"

Alec turned to Diallo. "What do you think, *mon ami?*"

Evening shadows were crawling across the garden and Diallo's face had that ebon sheen it takes on in dim light. "Even old fox takes pleasure in stalking rabbit."

"Old rabbits, maybe," I said and stepped into the garden to nip off a spray of roses. "Icebergs, Alec." I held them up. "Blue in the light."

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"Ice-blue, yes. Superb, those—shade and acidic soil are the secrets."

"Alec, your rotten poetry put blue roses into my head and then you put real blue roses in Inez' room. You and Luc rigged this whole weird charade, starting in the café where you fingered me for Inez and Larbi. But you were also pretty sure I'd spot their signals and stick my nose in. Correct?"

He nodded. "Professional curiosity overcomes lassitude. Therapy."

"Thanks—I had a bad case. But why the other clues? Why the near misses, why a mickey instead of cyanide?"

"The lady rather likes you, David, old lad. But she is not immune to money, and, most important, she too understands the hunt. Until the quarry feels the hot breath of the hounds, until he knows he is hunted and so must call up all his skills, what possible sport can there be for the huntsmen?"

"Come off it. Your idea is to even the score for that time I beat you out in Accra."

"David, David," he said indulgently, "we were mere boys. And surely you won't have forgotten how gloriously I did you in the eye in Kuala Lumpur. No, you must think of this as a sporting event. You do see?"

I saw at last. "You and Luc and probably Peter and God knows who else, all running with the hounds. A blood sport. My blood!"

He smiled approvingly. "Precisely, dear lad. Of course, we took a frightful risk with the *plastique*. Suppose Luc's man had been able to throw it far enough. Disaster! But our gamble paid off. Look at you. Alive. Ready for the chase—a quarry worthy of the hunt."

Casually he produced an ugly little pistol. "Now, do relax," he said courteously. "This is merely insurance against any unfortunate exuberance on your part. Today is for gathering strength. Tomorrow we hunt!"

"By God," I said, "it's finally sinking in. It wasn't sunstroke that did for old Heinrich in Marbella, it was you and your sporting pals. Well, friend, Diallo and I thrive on heat."

"Splendid! How true that, 'Danger, chill and fearsome cruel, doth—'"

"'—gyre and gimble in the wabe.'"

"Exactly!" Alec was in high humor. He gestured with the gun. "As you would expect, we have our rules. Sitting game has nothing to fear—but, please, no foolish moves. Nothing must disrupt the hunt."

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I glanced at Diallo. He read my mind and gave me a quick fierce grin.

Old soldiers never die. But middle-aged spies are mortal. And slower than they once were. I sat down and began, methodically, to shred the roses I still held.

Just for a second anguish contorted Alec's face and that second was all Diallo needed—a dark blur of motion and then he handed me the pistol.

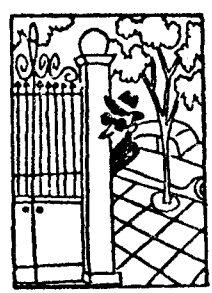
Thoughtfully I hefted it. Walther-made, MI-6 issue, neat, deadly.

Rubbing his arm gently, Alec was eyeing me carefully. I smiled at him with affection. My old friend had opened the door to the Golden Years. They were going to be like the old days, the dramatic days. There is exhilaration in the chase, even for the hunted. The trick is, don't get caught.

"Rules you have, eh, Alec? Give the quarry a sporting chance and all that. Okay, I know you and I believe you." I handed him the Walther.

He took it and slipped it into his pocket. "You've seized the spirit admirably, David. Just as I knew you would."

I leaned back comfortably. He was right, I now realized, I had *not* forgotten Kuala Lumpur. All even, our scoresheet read, his and mine. But this contest needed new rules—and new roles. Tomorrow, by God, *we* hunt, Diallo and I.



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a *NEW* short story by

JANE SPEED

The relationship between Wendy and Jeff was certainly an unusual one—"both less and more than friendship, rather like an ancient loyalty one must honor no matter what . . ." Wendy's mother didn't understand it. Jeff's mother didn't understand it. Even Wendy couldn't explain it . . .

Another of Jane Speed's perceptive studies of people . . .

JUST ANOTHER FRIDAY

by JANE SPEED

Wendy Carmichael was still getting ready for work when the doorbell rang that Friday morning and she wondered, mildly curious, who it could be so early.

She didn't have to wonder long. The minute her mother Clarice opened the door, Beryl Damon's unmistakable voice twanged to the farthest reaches of the apartment, "Clarice, honey, I hope you've got some aspirin. I woke up with this splitting headache and I don't dare stay home. That shipment from Caroline Casuals is due today and I have to check it out. Those idiots got the whole order wrong last time."

And Wendy, back in her room, couldn't repress a smile, thinking of something Jeff had once said. "Have you noticed lately? My dear mama not only sounds metallic, she looks metallic." And he was, as always, wickedly right; Beryl Damon's hair these days was tinted the same glinting bronze as her formidable Barbra Streisand fingernails.

Oh, Jeff hadn't changed a bit, mused Wendy, half glad, half sorry. They'd been out of touch for quite a while and she'd almost forgotten how he could make her laugh. A trifle uneasily perhaps—she wasn't always certain when he was teasing and when he was serious—but laugh she always did. And, in a way, she supposed she rather enjoyed hearing him say

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things she had neither the imagination nor the courage to express.

The Carmichaels and the Damons had moved into the Columbine Terrace Garden Apartments at about the same time, years ago when Jeff and Wendy were still quite small. Even then they were as unlike as two children could be—Wendy, sturdy of leg and stolid of temperament, forever a beat behind the clever, mercurial Jeff. But their mothers, both newly divorced, had found much in common, so the children were thrown together a great deal.

Wendy and Jeff kept each other company after school till their mothers got home from work and, on the nights when their mothers' eternal Friday bridge club met at one or the other of their apartments, they huddled in some out-of-the-way corner munching leftover refreshments and smothering their giggles as Jeff, already sharp of eye and tongue, made outrageous whispered comments about "the girls" in the club. The Gilded Detachment, he'd dubbed them. They were, he explained to Wendy in his mock-serious way, all "detached," whether by death or divorce, from the men who had figured briefly in their lives; and their incomes from their various jobs were "gilded" by their respective inheritances or divorce settlements—almost literally so, since these ladies tended to put their faith (and their funds) into diamonds or some glittery equivalent.

As Wendy and Jeff grew up, their paths inevitably diverged. Wendy had made her complaisant way through school and settled into a decent but ordinary job at Vogeler Paper & Twine; while Jeff, clearly destined for grander ventures, had ranged afield and already tried his hand at more things than Wendy could even keep track of. They moved now in entirely different circles, in different worlds really.

Yet, far apart as they had grown, there remained between them a peculiarly enduring attachment. Whenever Jeff came back—for a few days, a few weeks, a few months—they always got together "for old times' sake." And to call it simply a reunion of old friends would not be quite accurate; in fact, they no longer knew each other's friends and would not have cared for them if they had.

The relationship between Jeff and Wendy was something both less and more than friendship, rather like an ancient loyalty one must honor no matter what—a bond woven of the strands of their early shared

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experiences and, above all perhaps, of the mutual lack of a father in their lives.

How many rainy Saturdays had they whiled away playing the game Wendy would always think of as When My Father Comes Back? Properly speaking, it wasn't even a game; Wendy's only part had been to listen, enrapt, while Jeff spun fanciful tales. At first, these had centered about his father only. But quite early in the game he'd generously introduced the ingenious premise that their fathers, though complete strangers, had by marvelous coincidence met, taken an immediate liking to one another, and decided to make their way together.

Sometimes they were the only survivors of a tramp steamer, cast ashore on a hitherto uncharted island where they came upon a fortune in pearls just waiting there for the taking. Sometimes they went prospecting in the Australian outback, where, after untold hardships, they finally struck it rich.

One element, however, remained constant: wherever Jeff's lively imagination took the two men, they were always somehow cut off for years from civilization. This explained why they had remained so long out of touch with Wendy and Jeff who had, you may be sure, never been out of their thoughts. And the very first moment they were able, they would return, unimaginably rich and kind, to set their children's world to rights.

That was all long ago, of course.

Jeff had been back for nearly three months this time, working at a job his mother had wangled for him through her friend, Harry Baxter, at Peerless Insurance, so Wendy and Jeff had seen each other more than usual lately.

Wendy was fully dressed now but she dawdled a little over her hair, hoping to avoid getting involved in a long conversation with Beryl Damon. It sounded as though she was about to leave.

"Thanks a million, Clarice," Beryl was saying. "You're a lifesaver. I'd have sent Jeff down to the drug store, but you know what? He'd already left for work when I got up. Can you believe it? My Jeffie? Honestly, when I think how close I came to just giving that kid another handout— But all of a sudden I just thought, why? With his brains and his education? So instead I got on the phone to Harry and, believe you me, that was the best move I ever made; I should have done it years ago. Oh, Lord, look at the time. I've got to run. Dottie's picking us up at 7:15

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tonight, right? Okay, sweetie. See you then." And Wendy heard the door close.

Otherwise, it had started out like just another Friday.

Wendy had no sooner sat down to breakfast than her mother propped her chin on her hand and regarded her daughter with a bright, speculative eye. "You know what?" she said at last, giving that familiar little toss of the head. "I'd like to see you with a center part."

Wendy altered her expression slightly to indicate polite interest in the suggestion and went on eating her corn flakes. Nothing more was required of her. Her mother was already off and away on the stunningly classic effect she was sure this change in hair style would produce.

When Wendy *had* parted her hair in the middle, Clarice had been just as certain that what was wanted was the softening effect of a left part, and when she'd parted her hair on the left it was a right part Clarice thought might just do the trick, and so on round and round. But it would have been useless for Wendy to point this out, even if she could have got a word in edgewise. Mere facts would never shake Clarice Carmichael's belief that somewhere there was still to be found just the right lipstick or new shade of make-up or different hair style that would bring out some trace of her own perky prettiness in her one and only daughter.

"I just wish," Clarice fretted as Wendy carried her dishes over to the sink and washed them out under the tap, "I just wish I'd thought of it earlier. Then you could have changed it in time for your date tonight." She put a roguish little spin on the word "date." Wendy did not, in Clarice's view, make nearly enough of her chances which were, heaven knows, few enough.

"Oh, Mama." Wendy half turned in protest. "I told you, it's not really a date."

"Indeed?" Clarice opened her eyes wide in mock innocence. "Well, Jeff *is* meeting you after work and taking you to dinner, isn't he?"

"Yes, but—"

"*As* he has done every Friday night for two months now?"

"Oh, yes, but—"

"Well," Clarice overrode her triumphantly, "I don't know what *you* call it, my dear, but when I was a girl that's what we called having a date. Quite a few dates, I might add."

Wendy gave up arguing and turned back to the sink. It was just too hard to try to explain. Even to herself.

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"Wendy, old chum, Jeff had said, "I have an enormous favor to ask you." An exaggeration, as usual, because all he wanted was that she promise to meet him after work each Friday "to celebrate the end of another week at my good gray job." So Wendy had agreed, at the time she had nothing better to do. Besides, beneath all his jaunty hyperbole she dimly sensed a kind of urgency, maybe Jeff really *did* need something like that to get through the week.

But she'd never dreamed it would go on and on this way. Quite frankly, she hadn't thought Jeff would stick at the job that long.

Just after he started at Peerless he'd actually said to her, "You know, I envy you, Wendy, being able to plug along at that dull little job, putting aside a bit each week, doing the same thing—"

"But I like my job." The reaction was more surprised than defensive, Wendy truly did like her job. "I like working for Mr. Vogeler."

"Exactly my point," Jeff said. "You know what we are, don't you, Wen? The tortoise and the hare. And if I don't get something big going soon, *you*, my dear tortoise, are going to break free of the maternal toils before I do."

Wendy sighed, dried her hands, and brought her attention back to the present.

"... how you can be so indifferent," Clarice was lecturing away. "Just because Jeff is someone you've known all your life, why, Wendy dear, that's all the *more* reason to try to perk up your appearance. You know, I'll bet you'd still have time ..."

"Oh, no, I can't. Mr. Vogeler wanted me to come in a little early this morning."

"Oh, you and your Mr. Vogeler," grumbled Clarice as Wendy kissed her lightly and went out of the kitchen.

"Well, Wendy—wait—" Clarice hurried after her. "Now, this is bridge night, you know. We'll be at Mimi Feldkamp's. It was supposed to be at Gloria's but her place is still a mess after that burglary last week. So awful—it's positively getting to be an epidemic."

"I know, Mama, it's a shame. But honestly I have to leave now."

"Well, the point is, I may not be here when you get home. But it's quite all right with me, dear, *quite all right* if you invite Jeff in for a while. Do you understand?"

"I understand." Wendy had the front door open.

"What I mean is, Wendy, you *ought* to invite him in. For goodness' sake, dear, you must

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encourage him a little. You must *do your part.*"

"All right, Mama, all right. I'll ask him."

"Well, see that you do."

Wendy started down the stairs.

"And, Wendy"—Clarice's voice trailed after her—"don't you let Mr. Vogeler keep you overtime today. You just *tell* him you have a date, do you hear?"

There were plenty of good restaurants around town and you'd think Jeff, of all people, would crave variety. But for some reason they always ate at Moreno's. It was a nice place, of course, and they could sit and talk as long as they liked, so Wendy didn't really mind. The only thing that bothered her was that by now they'd become such Friday-night regulars that Mr. Moreno himself met them at the door and, full of clucks and smiles and knowing looks, showed them to the table he always saved for them. And Jeff, the fool, played right along with it.

Tonight he seemed more keyed up than ever, and Wendy slid into her seat, head down with embarrassment, just hoping there was no one here from her office to witness the outlandish performance.

"Honestly, Jeff," she said as Mr. Moreno scurried away with their orders. "Why do you do that?"

"What's the harm? The old boy loves playing Cupid."

"But it's just—not—true."

"Oh, well." Jeff shrugged. "If it's truth you want you've come to the wrong party. You should know that by now."

But for once Wendy was not going to be put off by his banter. She had something to say tonight and she was determined to say it. "It isn't just because of Mr. Moreno," she went on carefully. "I *have* been spending every Friday night with you for quite a long time now and—well, for one thing, Mama's got it into her head that—that you and I—"

"Good Lord!" Jeff pretended shock. "*You* don't think that, do you?"

"Oh, of course not! But you know how Mama is, Jeff. She—she's afraid I'm a hopeless case and she's ready to grasp at any straw, so naturally—"

Jeff cut her off with a stinging expletive. "You listen to me, Wendy," he said in sudden deadly earnest. "You are a dear and good and lovely girl. And don't you ever let your silly little mother with her silly little ways convince you otherwise."

"Oh—" Wendy stammered, taken aback. "Mama means well."

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Jeff looked at her for a long moment, then slowly nodded. "So she does," he said. "That's the rub, isn't it? They both mean well, your mama and mine. All right then"—his mood fizzed up as quickly as it had gone flat—"let's give the dear ladies A for good intentions, shall we? But always keeping in mind"—he wagged a finger in comic warning—"what hell is paved with."

Their dinner arrived just then and before Wendy could collect her wits enough to get on with what she wanted to say, Jeff himself returned to the subject.

"What you are getting at, Wendy," he said as if the flow of their talk had not been interrupted, "is that I have been taking up a great deal of your time with no thought at all as to your wishes in the matter. And you are quite right. I have used you badly."

"Oh, I don't mind, Jeff. It isn't that." He looked so solemn that Wendy was afraid she might have hurt his feelings. "Why, I'm glad if I've been some sort of help to you—"

"Oh, you've helped," he assured her. "You've no idea how you've helped," he added with an odd, wry smile.

But Wendy didn't notice. She was preoccupied with trying to phrase the one request she simply had to make. "It's just that next Friday," she plowed on doggedly, "well, you see, all the district managers are going to be in town for a conference. And on Friday night there's a dinner for them and their wives. And—well, I think I told you that Mr Vogeler's wife died last year. It's been very hard for him, he has two young children, you know And—well—"

"Mr. Vogeler would like you to attend the dinner with him," Jeff finished the sentence for her.

"Yes," breathed Wendy, relieved that it was out at last.

"Tell me." Jeff's tone was blandly conversational, but there was a mischievous glint in his eye that Wendy had learned to beware of "Does this Mr. Vogeler have a first name?"

"Well, of course!"

"And what might it be?"

Wendy hesitated. Then, shyly, as though she were imparting a secret, she said, "Sam." She ducked her head to hide the telltale blush and waited for Jeff's teasing laugh.

But it didn't come. "That's all I wanted to know," he said quietly "You tell lucky Sam Vogeler you'll be delighted to go to the dinner with him. And now"—he signaled a waiter—"this being, I rather think, our last night at Moreno's, we must

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have something to mark the occasion." And with a flourish he ordered an expensive champagne.

In a kind of pleasant daze Wendy watched the waiter uncork the bottle and fill their glasses. "To our heart's desire," Jeff proposed, and they drank. Yet, Wendy being Wendy, throughout her happy confusion there threaded a small earthbound concern. It was all so expensive. How would Jeff ever get his heart's desire—whatever that might be—if he threw away his money like this?

"Jeff"—it was the only thing she could think of to offer—"why don't you let me pay for the champagne?"

"Wouldn't hear of it!" He glowered at her in feigned indignation. "Come on now. Drink up."

"But," she persisted, "I thought you were trying to save money."

"Please, set your mind at rest, my little worrywart. Money, believe it or not, is no longer a problem. True. Your old pal Jeff is in the chips, loaded, filthy with the stuff."

"You got a raise?"

"Oh, my dear girl, nothing so paltry."

"Then what?"

"Well." He refilled their glasses and leaned toward her confidentially. "It's these three rich uncles, you see. Triplets, actually. Marvelous old chaps. Never married. Born together, succeeded together, and pouf! just like that, died together, leaving all their worldly goods to their one and only deserving nephew"

"You don't have any uncles," said Wendy disgustedly "You never did."

"Ah-h-h, can't fool you, can I? Very well then, I'll make a clean breast of it. If you must know, Wendy, I've been doing a little moonlighting."

Wendy looked skeptical. "A second job?" It was *possible*

"Yup. Oh, nothing strenuous, just a little selective breaking and entering. You might say I'm a kind of part-time Robin Hood—steal from the rich, give to the poor—namely, me. As a matter of fact, you know that series of burglaries that's afflicted the good ladies of the bridge club recently? My work." And he sat back with a grin, daring her to find the flaw in this one.

Another game. Wendy sighed and tried to put her mind to it. The champagne was making her thinking a little fuzzy, but she knew there was something wrong—oh, well, of course! "Every one of those burglaries"—she found that she had to concentrate carefully to get the words out right—"has taken

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place on a Friday night. While you were "

Jeff took up the sentence. "—sitting right here at this table. *As* you and our Mr Moreno can attest."

"Exactly." And Wendy took a generous swallow of her drink, feeling quite pleased with herself for having disposed of his new nonsense so handily

But, to her chagrin, Jeff remained undeflated. "So how," he beamed, "do I manage it?"

"You don't," Wendy insisted. Then, less certainly, "You couldn't."

"No? Well, try it this way Now, any self-respecting Robin Hood must have a band of merry men, right? Crude fellows who like to play rough and who are not above a spot of violence if anyone's around, but reliable enough so long as no one gets in their way. I picture Robin, you see, as the brains of the outfit. Through his superior connections he learns where a goodly treasure is stored. Well insured, of course, so as to cause the victim no more than a temporary inconvenience—Robin Hood is a consummate gentleman, you understand. Then, having taken care to provide himself with a perfect alibi, all good Robin has to do is let his cronies know when the coast will be clear and where to find the swag, and voila! one by one each victim is painlessly relieved of her quite replaceable valuables "

Jeff paused, looking at her steadily, then went one tantalizing step further. "And whose turn do you suppose it is tonight?"

"I don't know." Wendy's voice sounded louder than she'd intended, and she lowered her eyes to escape his challenging stare. She'd been having an increasingly hard time keeping Jeff in focus, and she didn't really feel too well. "I don't think" —she shivered a little— "that's a very good game."

"And I don't think"—he took the glass from her hand— "you should have any more champagne."

Wendy nodded in miserable assent. "Could we go home now?" she asked.

Jeff looked at his watch and said, "I see no reason why not."

Jeff parked the car about half a block from Columbine Terrace and as they approached their building he glanced up at the dark windows of his apartment.

"Our mamas don't seem to be home yet. Tell you what. Why don't I come over to your place and we'll make a pot of coffee. I think we could use some."

"*I* certainly could," said

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Wendy ruefully Then she giggled, just remembering. "Anyhow, Mama made me promise I'd ask you in. She thinks I don't encourage you enough."

So they were sitting at the kitchen table when Clarice burst in a short while later.

"Well, don't you two look cosy?" she cooed. "Oh, now, don't let me disturb you. I just came out for a drink of water."

"Would you like some coffee, Mama?"

"No, thank you, dear. It keeps me awake."

"Who was the big winner tonight?" Jeff asked.

"Well, to tell the truth, we didn't do much playing." Clarice made a little face. "Mostly just sat around talking about these awful burglaries. Do you realize that's happened to *five* of our girls? Gloria says someone must have put a hex on us. Well, it *does* make you wonder. The only ones left who haven't been burgled are your mother and Dottie and me."

"Helluva thing," Jeff agreed. "The police have any leads?"

"Oh, the police!" Clarice sniffed. "All they do is come in *afterwards* and make a worse mess than ever. A lot of good that does."

"Well." Jeff pushed back his chair and stood up. "It has been charming, ladies, but I think I'd better be getting upstairs "

"Why, there's no need to rush off," Clarice fluttered. "Wouldn't you like some more coffee? A sandwich perhaps?"

"No, no. Nothing, thanks. I really must be going. It's been a long day."

"Oh, well, I suppose it has. But you know you're welcome anytime, Jefi dear, just anytime. And I do hope," Clarice added, "your mother will be feeling better tomorrow."

"She's not feeling well?" Jeff paused, his hand still on the chair

"Why, no, she—oh, well, of course you wouldn't know—you left early this morning, didn't you? Well. She woke up, you see, with this awful headache. She got some aspirin from me, but as the day wore on she just felt worse and worse. And by the time she got home from work it was clear she was coming down with something. So I just told her, Beryl, I said, the only thing to do is tuck yourself right into bed and try to nip this in the bud."

"But she did play with you tonight, didn't she?"

"Oh, *no*, dear. She was in no condition, believe me."

"But"—Jeff shook his head as if trying to clear it—"mother always plays—"

"You know," Clarice sparkled, "we were commenting on that very thing tonight. In all

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the years we've been getting together—and that goes back a lot further than most of us would care to admit—this is the *first* Friday night Beryl has missed. Now, that *is* quite a record, isn't it?"

Wendy sat motionless watching Jeff He seemed to have turned to stone, his hands gripping the back of the chair.

It was several seconds before Clarice, still preening and chattering, became aware of the change in him. "Oh, now, Jeff!" she exclaimed. "I didn't mean to alarm you. Why, dear boy, I'm sure it's nothing serious. Just a touch of flu most likely. There's so much of that going around. Every year a different kind . " And on and on and on. But for all the attention they paid her she might have been a rattle in an empty room.

Slowly, stiffly, Jeff turned to Wendy. And his stricken eyes told her the plain and certain truth at last.

Wendy rose and put out her hand to him. One thing more, then, for old times' sake. "I'll go up with you, Jeff," she said.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

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a *NEW* short story by

LAEL J. LITTKE

Molly Daines was lonely, and her husband Ralph was insanely jealous. So when the new couple, the Braddocks, moved next door another of Lael J. Littke's witty whimsies.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT DOOR

by LAEL J LITTKE

Ralph told me not to get involved with the new people who were moving into the long-empty house next door, at the end of a rather secluded cul-de-sac.

"I like it the way it's been," he said. "Just you and me alone, Molly. No nosy neighbors running in and out."

But I was lonely Being alone, just Ralph and me, sounded romantic when we got married three years before; but after a while it wore pretty thin, especially after Ralph insisted I quit my secretarial job—he claimed there was hanky-panky going on between my boss and me—and installed me in that isolated house. He said we couldn't afford a second car, so I was stuck at home except when he took me shopping which wasn't often because he worked late almost every night.

That's why I was interested when the moving van arrived next door and started unloading furniture. For a while I watched from behind a curtain, but then since Ralph was at work, I went out to meet the new neighbors, keeping an ear cocked for the telephone. Ralph always called at least twice a day, and if I didn't answer he was apt to suspect me of running off with the mailman for a gala day in the post office.

"Hi," I said to the pretty blonde girl who was directing the moving men. I glanced around for someone who might be her husband, but I didn't see anyone. I wondered if she was single. "I'm Molly Daines, your next-door neighbor," I said.

"How do you do?" the girl

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said politely "I'm Eleanor Braddock." She smiled, but I thought the look she gave me was a trifle wary

I was anxious to make friends, so I babbled on. "I think you'll like it here, although it *is* a little out of the way For shopping and public transportation and things like that, I mean And the other neighbors are almost a block away " I waved my hand at the white house down the street Ralph and I had never made any effort to meet the people who lived there.

Eleanor looked and then said, "That's one reason we bought this house. I thought it would be rather nice—you know, not having people right in your pocket."

I thought that sounded like an invitation to leave and I was about to do so when Eleanor smiled genuinely and said, "I love the house. It's our first. We've always lived in apartments before."

"I guess you must be planning to stay for a while," I said, anxious to make conversation.

"Oh, yes," Eleanor said cheerfully. "Harry will be putting down roots here. My husband," she added in explanation.

I nodded, happy that they would be staying. "Look," I said, "I know what a hassle moving is. Why don't I fix up a casserole and salad to bring to you this evening?"

Again Eleanor's smile was a little wary. "Thanks," she said, "but I have to go get Harry."

She didn't say where she had to go get Harry and I didn't ask, but I assumed it was some distance since she was gone for two days. I was watching from my window the night they came back. It was after dark, so I couldn't see too well, but I guessed that the shadow that got out of the passenger side of the car was Harry. He moved so slowly that I wondered if there was something wrong with him

I know I sound like a snoopy neighbor, but I get tired of watching TV, and Ralph was late getting home that night, as usual And after all, it's interesting to get new neighbors.

But not much came of my interest. For a while, anyway Eleanor stayed inside most of the time, getting settled, I suppose, and as for Harry, I didn't see him at all. I watched for him to go to work or come home or just putter in the yard, but I never saw him.

Ralph asked about him, though.

"What's the new neighbor like?" he said one night as I prepared dinner

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"Oh," I said, "she's young. Blonde. Pretty."

"Not her. Him."

"Harry? I don't know," I said. "I've never laid eyes on him."

"You seem to know his name well enough." Ralph's eyes had got small and squinty

I stopped stirring the gravy and looked at him. "What is that supposed to mean, Ralph? I know his name because Eleanor mentioned him."

"It means I know what's going on here," Ralph said. "I never see this Harry around at night when I'm home. Therefore he must work at night, which means he's hanging around here keeping both you and Eleanor happy during the day"

"Ralph, that's ridiculous," I said patiently. I always tried to be reasonable when Ralph was unreasonable because if he got really nasty he would start pushing me around. Sometimes I was a little afraid of him and toyed with the idea of leaving him, but I had nowhere to go. Neither Ralph nor I had any family, and besides Ralph had told me once that if I ever ran away from him he would follow me and bring me right back.

Actually, when he wasn't in one of his jealous moods he was a fairly nice husband and quite helpful around the house, when he was home. Certainly he wasn't the easiest man in the world to live with, but I hadn't enjoyed living alone so much, either.

"I don't have any interest in Harry Braddock," I said, setting Ralph's dinner in front of him. Food usually helped to calm him down.

"Well," he growled around his meat and potatoes, "you stay away from him, hear?" He forked another hunk of meat into his mouth. "Keep away from Eleanor, too."

Ralph need not have worried about my having an affair with Harry, but I wasn't going to ignore Eleanor. After those first couple of weeks we became friends. I guess she decided I wasn't the kind who would be right in her pocket because when we were both out working in our rather bare yards she was very cordial.

"I really do like it here," she told me one day as we watered our scrubby front lawns. "I'm glad we'll be staying. Would you believe that Harry and I have never stayed in one place more than six months in the five years we've been married?" She sighed. "I think I'd be content just to stay right here the rest of my life."

"Not me," I said. "I stay home so much I get cabin fever"

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Eleanor laughed "That's easily remedied Come shopping with me How about tomorrow?"

I said I'd think about it. That night I asked Ralph if it was all right Of course he said no He said it eleven times, in fact He accused me of using that excuse for getting away for an afternoon with Harry

Eleanor looked at me closely the next day when I gave her a lame excuse why I couldn't go with her I wondered if she knew how it was with Ralph and me. All she said was, "I guess I won't go today, either Let's plant flowers instead."

I thought it was nice of her to stay there with me, and since it was hot working there in our small treeless back yards I invited her in for a cool drink and lunch. It was the first time either of us had been inside the other's house.

"This is fun," Eleanor said as we ate thick grilled cheese sandwiches "We should do it more often."

"Yes," I agreed. "I wish I could invite you and Harry over for dinner sometime, but I never know when Ralph will be working late "

"That's all right," Eleanor said "Harry doesn't like to go out "

I nodded understandingly and waited for Eleanor to say more about Harry but she didn't, so I said, "I guess Harry's pretty busy these days getting settled in a new place and all." I hoped she'd tell me something about what he did And when

Eleanor helped herself to the second half of her sandwich "Harry's branching out," she said.

I didn't say anything, hoping she'd tell me what he was branching out in But instead she said, "Did you make your cute kitchen curtains?" and that led to a discussion of what she was doing with her windows. I decided if she didn't want to talk about Harry that was her business. Certainly there were plenty of things about Ralph I didn't care to discuss.

Speaking of Ralph, he made one of his periodic checkup phone calls while Eleanor was there and when he heard her drop a knife in the background he leaped to conclusions.

"It's just Eleanor," I said when he demanded to know who was there. "We're having lunch together, Ralph."

"So you *are* carrying on behind my back," he snarled. "Can't wait until I get out of the house in the morning so you can invite *him* in."

"Who do you mean, Ralph?" I said. "I told you *Eleanor* is here Just *Eleanor* "

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"I know what you told me." His voice was nasty. "I know what you've been telling me all along. Do you think I'm blind?" He went on to say such disgusting things that I was in tears when I hung up.

There wasn't any way of hiding the tears from Eleanor since she was right there. She looked so sympathetic that I broke down and wept on her shoulder, telling her all about Ralph, his insane jealousy and accusations, his late working hours, and all.

"I just can't stand it much longer," I sobbed.

"We all have our problems, Molly, believe me," she said, patting my back. Then she said, "Do you really know what he does at night? There's an old French saying, 'A man is not likely to look behind the door unless he has stood there himself.' "

I had wondered occasionally if there was another woman, but I had never dared to accuse Ralph. I told Eleanor so.

"Hmmm," she said, looking at me as if trying to make a decision. "Well, things will work out. As for now, why don't you come over and give me some advice about my kitchen curtains?"

I was disappointed that she dismissed my problem so easily, but I was also curious about her house and about Harry, so I wiped my eyes and went with her. I wondered if Harry would be there.

Harry was there, all right.

"Molly," Eleanor said, taking me up to him. "I don't think you've ever met my husband." Politely she made introductions.

I stared. Harry stood in a corner of the living room with his feet in a large redwood tub filled with dirt. Leafy branches erupted from his head and shoulders, and tendrils of greenery sprouted from his fingers.

"How do you do, Harry?" I stammered. He said nothing, but his leaves trembled. I tried to smile at him, but it was hard to distinguish just where his trunk left off and his face began.

"Eleanor," I whispered, gesturing at Harry. "Eleanor. . "

Eleanor laughed. "I told you Harry was branching out, Molly."

"I know," I choked, "but I thought—I thought—" I looked at the large redwood tub and another light dawned. "Eleanor, what you said about Harry putting down roots here—" I pointed wordlessly at the tub.

"Of course," she said. "Now come look at my kitchen windows and give me some advice."

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I don't know if I could have even seen her windows at that moment. At any rate, I didn't get a chance to try, because Ralph drove into our driveway just then. After a quick check in our house he came storming over and pounded on the door When I ran to open it he took the strange look on my face for sure guilt. Bellowing like an enraged buffalo, he charged.

"Don't tell me now that it was Eleanor you were with," he roared, and the last thing I remember was trying to dodge his enormous fist.

I was in the hospital for two days with a cracked rib and slight concussion sustained when I fell down Eleanor's front steps after Ralph hit me. When my brain began to function again without too much pain I wondered if what I had seen in Eleanor's house was real or if I had imagined it. I didn't say anything about it because I knew the doctors would take it for rantings from an injured brain

A contrite Ralph visited me in the hospital. He said Eleanor had assured him that I had been visiting *her* "Harry wasn't even home," he said. "After your—uh—accident she made me come in and look all through the house. I'm sorry, Molly. Forgive me?" He gave me his most charming smile

My heart hurt as I thought it over

Ralph took it for granted he was forgiven. "Don't know what you see in that woman," he said. "Anyone who'd keep a tree in their living room has to be nuts."

So I hadn't imagined it. I knew what I had to do. It was my duty to report what happened to Harry to some kind of authority, but first I felt I had to tell Eleanor what I intended to do.

After Ralph left for work on the first morning I was home from the hospital I went next door

"Hi," Eleanor greeted me cheerfully "Guess what? I planted Harry yesterday "

"Planted?" I said "Did he die?"

"Heavens, no," she said, grinning. "Come look."

She led me through the house and pointed out of her kitchen window to where a handsome tree stood in the corner of her lawn which adjoined mine.

"Harry?" I stammered

Eleanor nodded. "Doesn't he look wonderful? I had to hire two men to come take him out there. They couldn't understand how I got a tree that big to grow inside the house."

"Frankly, I don't either," I said weakly "Just what kind of

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disease did Harry have?"

She smiled. "It wasn't a disease, Molly." Opening a cupboard she picked up a bottle and handed it to me. "I meant to show you this the last time you were here."

Green-O, the label read, and underneath it was printed: *Guaranteed to make growing things greener in 30 days.*

"If you think Ralph's a problem," she said, "you should have known Harry. The reason we moved around so much was so his bad checks wouldn't catch up with us. You wouldn't believe the rotten deals he pulled." She shook her head. "He used to threaten me so I wouldn't tell. Then one day I saw this Green-O in a store. I wasn't sure just what it would do, but I discovered that you can't taste it in a strong cup of coffee."

That was five months ago. Just yesterday Eleanor and I were sitting in our shady nook after we got home from our jobs. Together Ralph and Harry make a lovely green corner in our once treeless back yards.

"Did Ralph's friends ever wonder what happened to him?" Eleanor asked.

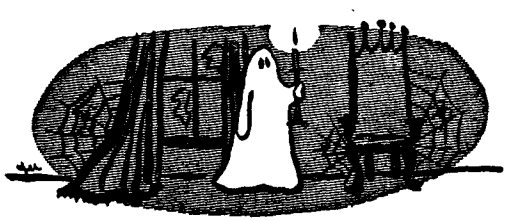
I shook my head. "Not really. They all knew where he spent his evenings and they assumed he ran off with the girl. One fellow asked me what happened to Ralph and I just said, 'Ralph turned into a tree.' " I giggled. "All the man said was 'Ralph always did drive too fast.' "

Overhead Ralph's branches quivered.

Eleanor stretched luxuriously and took a sip from her cool drink. "Well, you don't have to worry any more about where Ralph is at night."

I nodded. "And Harry has pulled his last shady deal."

We laughed together as a little breeze whispered like a sigh through the leaves above our heads.



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a *NEW* "Man Who" story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

A story with an inner glow for mystery fans and aficionados. . .Old Prichard was a lowly library employee—a "stack boy" despite his 70 years. But he loved to read detective stories and he still had an excellent memory of what he had read. So when a perplexing problem arose involving detective stories, the septuagenarian sleuth was ready for the test, and no "great detective" of fiction could have done better. . .

THE MAN WHO READ DASHIELL HAMMETT

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

"Prichard? I know you're in here somewhere. Probably with your nose stuck in another of those mystery thrillers. Well, come out at once. I need you."

Mr. Deacon's nasal whisper was strangely muffled amid the closely set shelves of books that made up the fiction room of the Caldwell Public Library. Clarence Prichard, his aged joints creaking almost audibly, rose stiffly from the little stool on which he had been sitting. With a sigh of regret he closed the book he had been reading and slipped it into its place. The urbane conversations between Nick and Nora Charles would have to remain frozen in print till he could get back to them.

"Oh, there you are, Prichard." Mr. Deacon, the head librarian, rounded the corner of a passageway between the shelves and caught sight of the old man. "I wish you'd keep the front desk informed of your whereabouts. We aren't the size of the big city libraries, but it's sometimes devilishly hard to find a stack boy when we need one."

Boy? Prichard snorted audibly. His sixty-fifth birthday

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and enforced retirement from his bookkeeping job had both occurred five years before. The long illness that preceded his wife's death had wiped out his savings, and the government check he received each month was insufficient for his needs. The offer of a job replacing library books in their proper places had seemed like a godsend, and boring as it was, it did allow him time to read his beloved mystery stories. So if Mr. Deacon insisted on the term "stack boy," that was all right. Besides, what other term was there? Stack septuagenarian?

He did envy Deacon's well-tailored clothes and his position of responsibility, of course. To deal with the public, to be of real assistance to the library's patrons, to be addressed as "Mister Prichard"—that would be really something. But that was only a dream. Mr. Deacon was trained in every facet of the library's operation, while Prichard's familiarity with mystery stories, encyclopedic as it was, was not in demand.

"Prichard, I've heard rumors that you're uncommonly knowledgeable about mystery stories. Is that true?"

Prichard could hardly believe his ears. It was almost as if Mr. Deacon had been reading his mind.

"Yes, sir," he answered. "I've read all of 'em in the library here and I've got a lot of them in my room. But I don't let it interfere with my job, Mr. Deacon, and that's a fact."

Deacon shook his head and honored Prichard with a rare smile. "I'm not concerned with your work in the stacks right now," he said.

"Then what—"

"Prichard, I—"—the words came out reluctantly— "I need you. It's not part of your regular work, but you seem to be the only one on our staff who reads detective fiction regularly, and I hope you won't consider it an imposition if—"

"You're not imposing, Mr. Deacon. I'd be glad to help in any way I can."

"Very well. There are two men waiting out in the research room. One of them—the short one in the black suit—is a Mr. Farragut. I've never seen him before. But the other is Andrew King. Do you recognize that name, Prichard?"

"Oh, sure. He's the president of the library board, isn't he?"

Deacon nodded ominously. "They insist on talking with a mystery reader. I could hardly admit to Mr. King that nobody on the staff qualifies. So willy-nilly, it's up to you, Prichard. Go. And make the Caldwell Public Library proud of you."

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Deacon's gesture of dismissal would have been worthy of King Henry sending his troops into battle at Agincourt.

On reaching the research room Prichard immediately recognized Mr. Farragut from Deacon's description. He was a little balding man with wire-rimmed spectacles, wearing a wrinkled black suit that gave him the appearance of a seedy undertaker. The other, heavy-set and sporting a checked jacket of blinding red and green, had to be Mr. King.

There was a round of handshaking as Prichard introduced himself. "Sit down, Mr. Prichard!"

Mr. Prichard! The title sounded strange when attached to his own name. The old man fairly glowed with satisfaction.

"Deacon said you knew your mysteries," King went on. "Are you familiar with the works of Dashiell Hammett?"

"Yes, sir. Read everything he ever wrote. *Red Harvest. The Dain Curse.* All of 'em."

"I was thinking in particular of *The Maltese Falcon.*"

"Sure. One of the greatest. But if you want it you'd have to apply through our county loan service. This library don't have a copy."

"It does now," wheezed Farragut with a nasty chuckle.

"I don't get you."

"No reason why you should." Farragut's smile threatened to split his face in two. "Get to the point, Andrew."

"All right, Edmund," said King with a sigh. He turned to Prichard. "Mr. Farragut and I have been friends for a good many years. During his lifetime he has amassed a collection of detective-story first editions, many of them quite rare and valuable. And he has expressed a willingness to give the collection—well over five hundred volumes—to our library."

"Maybe so and maybe no," chuckled Farragut. "First, Andrew, you and your library have to prove yourselves worthy."

Prichard shook his head uncomprehendingly.

"The test," added Farragut. "Tell him about the test, Andrew."

"Oh, of course." King leaned toward Prichard. "Both Edmund and I are mystery fans. Like yourself. But we've tended to specialize. I prefer the tough thriller—the so-called Black Mask type of story. Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, Lew Archer. Yes, even Mike Hammer. The rugged, lone-wolf types who live just barely within the law and sometimes outside it. They're really the only truly interesting characters in mys-

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tery fiction. And the greatest of these, of course, is Hammett's Sam Spade."

"Rubbish!" snapped Farragut. "Give me your English country house with rich old Aunt Matilda garroted by her own scarf and skewered to the divan with the antique sword from over the mantel. Enter the great detective—Holmes, Poirot, Fell, or whoever. A sifting of clues, a questioning of suspects, a bit of logical analysis interrupted only by a bountiful meal and perhaps another killing or two, and the murderer is brought to justice. That is, if he doesn't have the decency to commit suicide to protect the family's good name. All nice and civilized. Why, Andrew, those ham-fisted, trenchcoated thugs you read about couldn't detect their way out of a phone booth."

"Not so, Edmund! They deal with real people, not the clay figurines who populate the stories you're so fond of. Furthermore—"

"Gentlemen," whispered Prichard, a finger to his lips. "I'm afraid you're getting a bit loud."

"Quite so," said Farragut softly. "At any rate I've decided on a little test for Mr. Andrew King. I want to see if his idiotic stories have taught him anything about the deductive process. So I've set him a little problem. If he solves it, my collection goes to the library. If not, I'll take it to some other place where fine detective stories are really appreciated."

"But where do I fit in?" asked Prichard.

"Sherlock Holmes had his Watson, Poirot his Hastings, and so on. Even in those shocking Hammett stories the private eyes have friends on the police force who gain access to official reports and open otherwise closed doors. Therefore I agreed that Andrew could have one member of the library staff to assist him in his search."

"Search?" asked Prichard. "What search?"

"That is the test we've been talking about," answered Farragut. "Basically it amounts to this. I have concealed somewhere in this library one of the first editions from my collection. In deference to Andrew's abominable taste in mysteries the volume I selected was Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon.*" He drew a large watch from a coat pocket. "It's now three o'clock. Find the book in one hour and I'll give all my first editions to the library. Otherwise—" Farragut shrugged and spread his hands wide.

For a long moment Prichard and King stared at one another. "But this is hardly fair,

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Edmund," said King finally. "I mean you can't expect us to start rummaging through all the shelves and cabinets and packing boxes in a single hour. It's impossible."

"A point well taken," murmured Farragut. "But the book is on a shelf—where books would be expected to be."

"Umm." King rubbed at his nose with a fist. "The criminal-hiding-in-the-crowd ploy, eh? The old leaf-in-the-forest ploy? He turned to Prichard. "Well, what about it? Do we have time to scan all the shelves in a single hour?"

"Mebbe, just barely," replied Prichard. "You're sure the book is in plain sight, Mr. Farragut?"

"I didn't say that. I merely said it's on one of the shelves."

"Well, you can't expect us to pull every book down to see if there's something behind it. I mean it would take days just to put everything back."

"That won't be necessary. It's at the front of its shelf. Besides, you're not allowed to grasp books at random. You may look at the spines all you wish, but the very first book you pull from its place will be considered your final selection. Right or wrong, you get only one chance."

There was a long silence. King gnawed at his knuckles. Prichard suspected, quite correctly, that the man was not so worried over the prospect of losing the collection of books as he was annoyed at the possibility of being bested by Farragut.

"See here," King said finally. "This really isn't fair, Edmund. I mean, all detectives have some time to gather clues. That's what this test of yours is lacking—clues. We're expected to go rummaging around the building without having any opportunity to discover when you might have come in here to conceal the book or"—his voice trailed off lamely—"or anything."

"I was wondering when you'd get to that," answered Farragut. "Clues." He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a white envelope. "Here are your clues. All neatly wrapped."

He threw onto the table a letter-size white envelope. Scrawled on its back was a series of numbers: 3.14.

Prichard glanced hurriedly at the numbers. "Excuse me," he said, getting to his feet. He walked quickly to a corner of the research room. There he paused for a moment, then went out through the door.

A little over ten minutes later he returned, shaking his head morosely.

"Where in blazes have you been?" asked King. "Now we

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have only about forty-five minutes."

"I figured that number might represent the Dewey system of book cataloguing," said Prichard, catching his breath. "But it didn't. We got no books numbered 3.14. The nearest I could come in the file cards was a pamphlet listing governmental agencies. But then I thought the decimal might have been a red herring, so I tried 314."

"And—" said King expectantly.

"Nothing. Just one book on educational statistics."

"Ten minutes for that?"

Prichard shook his head. "I had another thought. That number—3.14—is what they call pi in mathematics."

"Pi?"

"Yes, sir. It has something to do with circles. So I checked the sections in the catalogue on pure and applied sciences, mathematics in particular. Quite a few cards to look through. Then, thinking it might be another kind of pie, I looked through all our cards on cookbooks."

"You didn't take any book off the shelves, did you?" asked Farragut sharply.

"No, sir."

"Good tries, all of them, though," said King. "I'm impressed—Deacon didn't make a mistake assigning you to me. That pi business would have escaped me completely. Well, we still have nearly three-quarters of an hour—till four o'clock sharp. And two other clues."

He reached into the envelope, removed a small white card, and flipped it to Prichard. One side was blank. The other had two words neatly printed in pencil:

double dozen

While Prichard examined the card, King handed him the second one. It was similar to the first, except that its message read:

Maltese falcon

Prichard tried to recall every book he'd ever heard of with either "double" or "dozen" in its title. King went to the card catalogue to check each of them. In the meantime Prichard ran down all references to either Malta or falconry. Thirty minutes later, with nothing to show for their labors, they returned to the table where Farragut was waiting—and grinning.

"You're perspiring, Andrew," he said with a chuckle. "Is it the physical exertion or just nervousness at the idea of losing to me?"

"Edmund, you've been smirking at me like that for nearly fifty years. But this time I'll win. I swear it."

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"Only fifteen minutes to go."

"Yes, well—" King turned to Prichard, his face drooping. "What about it?" he asked. "Can you make anything out of those so-called clues?"

"I—I think the mistake we've been making is to take the three clues one at a time," said Prichard. "They must all hang together some way. Two false clues and only one real one would be downright unfair."

"All right." King arranged the cards and envelopes in front of him. "Pi," he said. "Then double dozen. And finally Maltese falcon. I don't know what to make of them."

"Give up, Andrew?" asked Farragut.

"Oh, I suppose we might as well—"

"Wait a minute. Please." Prichard reached across the table and slid the clue cards in front of him. "These don't have to be in the same order, you know." He arranged the cards and envelopes in various ways, each time shaking his head.

"You know, I like Mr. Prichard's style better than yours, Andrew," said Farragut. "He keeps going. What would your hardboiled detectives think if they saw you giving up this way? Just remember, Mr. Prichard, things aren't always what they seem."

Prichard, who had only been half listening, suddenly looked up and stared at Farragut. Something Farragut had said was beginning to penetrate. He swiveled toward King. "How much more time?" he asked.

"About seven minutes. Why?"

Prichard pointed at the envelope. "3.14," he said. "That's pi. Now what's a double dozen?"

"Twenty-four," replied King. "So what?"

"I think I see a little light at the end of the tunnel," said Prichard. "Mr. Farragut just said that things aren't always what they seem. He thought he was being clever and sneaking something past us, but it was a new clue. Isn't that right, Mr. Farragut?"

For the first time the little man in black didn't seem so sure of himself.

"Here we got three clues," Prichard went on, "each saying a thing one way that could be said another. 3.14 is pi. And a double dozen is 24. Now who's to say the second card doesn't do the same thing?"

"Maltese falcon," muttered King. "It's a book, that's all."

"No, Mr. King," said Prichard, his voice rising in excitement. "Look, the word 'falcon' doesn't start with a capital letter. So either Mr.

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Farragut made a mistake—which I doubt—or he wasn't thinking about the book but the bird itself."

"That sounds reasonable," said King. "Keep talking."

"It seems to me that Mr. Farragut must have read *The Maltese Falcon* at some time, even if he didn't like it too well. I mean, he had it in his collection, didn't he?"

"I've read it," Farragut admitted grudgingly.

"Yeah. So the 'Maltese falcon' card must be connected with the story some way. Now, I've been giving a little thought to the falcon—small 'f'—in Hammett's book. That falcon was supposed to be a gold statue covered with jewels that Casper Gutman and Joel Cairo wanted Sam Spade to help them find. According to Gutman, the fat man, the Knights of Rhodes had the statue made and sent to the Spanish king as a kind of reward for allowing them to live on Malta some time in the fifteen hundreds. But while it was being taken to the king, the bird was captured by pirates. It got passed from one person to another for a couple of hundred years, and during that time it was dunked in black paint to disguise what it was really worth."

"The man's uncanny," said Farragut to King.

"Because of the black covering," Prichard went on, "Spade and several other characters gave the statue a kind of nickname."

"Sure," said King. " 'The black bird'."

Again Prichard shuffled the cards and envelope about. Finally satisfied, he took a pencil from his pocket and scribbled on the envelope and on each of the cards in turn. Then he rose from his chair.

"C'mon, you two," he said. "I know where to find that book."

Two minutes later they came to the bottom of the stairs which led to the basement of the building. "But this is the children's section," said King. "Farragut wouldn't try to hide one of Hammett's books here. It would stand out like a sore thumb."

"No?" Prichard nodded toward Farragut. "Take a gander at his face, and then tell me I'm wrong. He looks as worried as a basset hound with fallen arches."

Prichard moved along the shelves, peering intently at the books. "*The Maltese Falcon* on a shelf, according to him," he said to King. "But he wouldn't admit that it's in plain sight. Therefore there must be a wrapper or dust jacket on it—from another book."

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He ran his finger along a line of books, all but one of which had no jackets, and finally pointed to a book with a blue-paper covering. The spine of the jacket had a picture of Humpty-Dumpty. Carefully he leaned over to examine the top of the book.

"It seems a little small for its jacket," said Prichard. "You'd almost think the two weren't made to fit together." He reached out, grasped the book, and jerked it free of the shelf.

"There, Mr. Farragut," he said. "That's the book you hid."

On the wall the clock chugged loudly, and the minute hand pointed straight up. Four o'clock.

King took the book and with trembling hands slid it out of the ill-fitting paper jacket covered with nursery-rhyme characters. He leafed through the pages and then looked wide-eyed at Prichard. "That's it!" he whispered in awed tones. "A first edition of *The Maltese Falcon.*" He turned to Farragut.

"I've won, Edmund." King's voice trembled with excitement. "Your collection belongs to the library. At last I've gotten the best of you."

"Oh, I suppose so," replied Farragut testily. "But I still stick to my opinion of your choice of detective stories. After all, it was Mr. Prichard here who did all the detective work."

"It really wasn't—" Prichard began.

"No, it's true, Mr. Prichard," said King. "And I'm eternally grateful. But would you mind telling me how you figured it out? Why here in the children's section, of all places?"

"It was in the three clues," smiled Prichard. "3.14 equal pi. And Maltese falcon is black bird. And double dozen is twenty-four."

He took the cards and envelopes from his pocket and arranged them on a table. King read them aloud, as Prichard had rewritten them.

"Four-and-twenty—black bird—pi."

"Not quite," said Prichard. "Remember, 'pi' was written on the envelope. And the cards were in the envelope."

"All right then, four-and-twenty—black bird—in pi. Of course! The old nursery rhyme. 'Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye. Four-and-twenty blackbirds baked in a pie.'"

Prichard pantomimed withdrawing the book from the false jacket and took up the chant: "'When the pie was opened, the birds began to sing.'" He pointed to the book in Andrew

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King's hand and concluded the poem.

" 'Now wasn't that a dainty dish to set before the *king?*' "

Andrew King applauded heartily. Farragut remained stolidly silent.

"Naturally when I spotted this book jacket I figured I'd found what we were looking for," added Prichard. "Especially when I saw the book didn't fit the jacket."

"*Sing a Song of Sixpence and Other Childhood Poems,*" read King from the paper jacket. "Of course, this had to be it—the only nursery-rhyme book with a jacket. A superb bit of deduction, Mr. Prichard."

"Andrew," said Farragut drily, "I'm attaching another condition to your acquisition of my mystery collection."

"No fair, Edmund." King waved an admcnishing finger.

"No, I think you'll like this one. A collection as valuable as mine needs someone to take care of it. And I insist that you appoint Mr. Prichard here. At a whacking good increase in salary, of course. A man of his talents ought to be put to better use than just shoving books onto shelves. And who knows? Maybe he can even get you interested in the truly great detective-story writers. Doyle, Christie, Sayers—"

"Hammett, Chandler, Macdonald," countered King.

As the litany of names droned on, Prichard silently backed out of the room. Hardboiled stories or the classical "great detective" variety—which were better? He didn't care to argue the point.

He liked 'em all.

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Now who shall argue with the luck of the draw? For the second time this year, having received no worthy new fiction in a whole month, I must glance back to reassess the work of some classic mystery-monger from the past. It has been made easy by the able new biography of a more than suitable candidate, which I take as my text for this sermon.

Melville Davisson Post: Man of Many Mysteries, by Charles A. Norton (Bowling Green University Popular Press, $8.95 cloth, $3.95 paper), celebrates the multi-talented West Virginian—lawyer, sportsman, criminologist—who ranked among our most successful magazine writers in the blazing heyday of magazines, and even now remains American master of the detective short story.

Born of well-to-do parents in the aristocratic tradition, wide-ranging cosmopolite despite persistent ill health, he was as much at home in England or France as on his own native heath. Yet early influences held fast. Though he created Jonquelle of Paris and Scotland Yard's Sir Henry Marquis, his best-known tales feature Uncle Abner, stern Calvinist of pre-Civil War hills which had not yet become West Virginia.

He soon became a conscious stylist. His spare, sinewy prose, shorn of excess words but never shorn of vividness or power, anticipated modern trends and set a precedent sometimes forgotten or overlooked by critics today.

The biographer stresses this academic neglect. In his relatively short lifetime (1869-1930) Post handled many themes: the cattlemen's novel called *Dwellers in the Hills*, the religious allegory of *The Mountain School-Teacher*, factual crime investigation with *The Man Hunters*. But, since most of those who remember him will remember some brilliant short story with a whiplash surprise ending, his biographer resents the critical condescension which can find no depth or profundity here.

Mr. Norton need scarcely have worried. At his best in recreating Melville Post the man and personality, as a good biographer should

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be, he is perhaps less happy in judging detective fiction, which he does not seem really to understand.

And yet he is right in his complaint. "Depth" and "profundity" are relative terms, too often used for the merely pretentious or phony. Since giants like Mark Twain and G. K. Chesterton always revelled in blood and thunder, any condescending attitude belongs with the snows of yesteryear. A good story needs no justification; let's make our own appraisal.

Post's first tales, appearing at the turn of the century, concern the schemes of Randolph Mason, cynical New York attorney, whose clients' crimes are committed within the framework of the law. The last collected volume, issued after his death, gives us doughty Colonel Braxton, defense counsel of the old tradition and breed.

They were spiritual extremes as well. Through the intervening years this conscientious craftsman perfected his diamond-sharp prose, his atmospheric sense, and the technique of construction by building up mystery and solution together until their ultimate explosion.

For our brief glance, at least, one book should remain without comment. The classic tales in *Uncle Abner, Master of Mysteries* (1918) need no further praise.

As a personal choice, if I may, let me recommend "The Great Cipher," initial adventure from *Monsieur Jonquelle, Prefect of Police of Paris* (1923). "The Great Cipher," which will conjure up nightmare images, misleads readers *because* each statement in the evidence is literal truth. It was the favorite Post story of S. S. Van Dine, with whose verdict mature judgment must agree.

There is much to be said for "The Cambered Foot," from *The Sleuth of St. James's Square* (1920). And also, in *The Mystery at the Blue Villa* (1919), for the story with that same title. "The Garden in Asia," from *The Bradmoor Murder* (1929), shows how a railway engine vanished into thin air.

If on some dusty second-hand shelf you find any of these four out-of-print volumes, you will unearth much pleasure. Melville Davisson Post wrote a number of weak stories, as every great craftsman has done. He did not always play fair with the clues. But he was a literary hypnotist *par excellence*, and his sensational effects have never been surpassed.

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a NEW Loren Mensing story by

FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

Loren Mensing—law professor, deputy legal adviser to the Police Commissioner, and (his own description) "some sort of detective" (a phrase that can be interpreted literally or according to the latest idiom)—is asked to investigate a possible crime that could be, "at this point in time," the subject matter of today's Page One headline. And surely Loren Mensing, legal beagle, carries on the noble tradition of lawyer-detectives—Melville Davisson Post's Randolph Mason, Arthur Train's Mr. Tutt, Craig Rice's John J. Malone, and Erle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason (Mason to Mason, closing the old circle). . .

THE POSSIBILITY OF TERMITES

by FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

As the Saturday afternoon shadows lengthened and the time of his plane's departure from Capital City International Airport came and went, Loren Mensing remained in his hotel room, his packed suitcases kicked into a corner and forgotten. He and the two visitors sat in plastic-coated armchairs around the small formica-topped coffee table, gazing at the purple shoebox.

The Honorable Franklyn Donelson, Lieutenant Governor of this northwestern state more than a thousand miles from where Loren taught law, rose once again from his chair, which hissed stickily as he vacated its uncomfortable seat, and paced the length of the window wall, blocking the view of evergreen-studded hills in the distance. He was a tall man, totally bald, with a hard flat belly and a grip like a strangler's—Loren had heard that he ran ten laps every evening in the basement gym of the state Executive Office Building—and with a look on

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his face that said more plainly than words that he wished he were not here.

But if the Lieutenant Governor's features revealed nervous impatience those of the woman who had come with him showed terror. The widow of the late Justice Richmond of the State Supreme Court was fiftyish, small-boned and delicate-featured, with pale blue eyes that would glance horrified every minute or so at the shoebox on the table. The way her gaze kept returning to the purple cardboard box reminded Loren of a bird hypnotized by a snake. When she reached for her water glass her hand trembled.

"I found it after breakfast this morning," she summarized again, "while I was sorting through Ben's clothes for a charity drive. It was wedged behind the suitcases on the shelf of his closet. When I saw what was in it I called Frank immediately—we're cousins, as I've said—and we discussed what should be done. I remembered seeing in the paper that you were to go home today after teaching a two-week summer course at State University Law School, and of course I'd read about the cases you had investigated as deputy legal adviser to the Police Commissioner where you live. Frank didn't want me to call you—he thought the Governor alone should decide how to handle it—but I insisted. I wouldn't have asked you to cancel your plane reservation and listen to me if it weren't so urgent."

Loren once again lifted the lid with a ballpoint pen, so as not to leave his own prints, and studied the inscription *Lilley's* printed on the lid in ornate script, and looked down at the contents of the box—$50,000 in crisp $20 and $50 bills.

"You know what so much money so carefully hidden suggests as well as I do," Lieutenant Governor Donelson said, his voice a controlled boom.

"Bribe," Loren answered simply. At the word the widow shuddered.

"It's unthinkable!" Donelson sat down again and slammed his palm on the table top. "Ben Richmond was a close friend of the Governor and one of the most respected attorneys in this state. Last fall the Governor appointed him to fill a Supreme Court vacancy, and then in January after only four months on the bench Justice Richmond suffered a coronary and died. Throughout his career there was never a whisper of corruption about him, never a whisper, and now six months after his death this has to happen."

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"There must be some innocent explanation," Iris Richmond insisted in a broken voice. "Professor Mensing, I'll pay you anything in the world to find the truth. You can't know what I'm going through because of this. Not unless you've lived with someone and loved him for half a lifetime, and lost him suddenly, and then found something like—like this that threatens to turn the whole life you shared into a wreck and a lie." She dabbed at eyes like fragile blue glass.

"Would you mind telling me once more about the bedroom in your house?" Loren asked her, hoping the mechanical repetition would distract her from her grief.

"Ben and I had separate bedrooms. When he was alive no one but he and I ever went into his room. He kept it locked during the day because his den opened off the bedroom and at times he had things in there, drafts of opinions and so on, which had to be kept secure until they were published. The suite has been locked since he died, except for cleaning of course. So I don't see how anyone but Ben could have put the shoebox in his closet."

"Who cleaned the judge's suite?" Loren asked.

"The maid, Angela Kramer, a girl who comes in three days a week. We engaged her last fall when Ben was appointed to the court and we moved here, and I've kept her on since Ben's death."

"Could she have put the shoebox in the closet?"

"Why, of course not! I let her in every day she comes to work and she's never brought anything to the house with her that would be large enough for the box to fit in."

"But you don't stay with her when she cleans the judge's rooms?"

"No," Iris Richmond admitted, shaking her Dresden-shepherdess head.

"All right, if she couldn't have brought the box into the house we're on a dead-end trail with the maid. Now, who else might have brought it in? You and the judge entertained at times, I assume?"

"Very little really. I suppose Frank and Blanche Donelson were our most frequent guests. We had other members of the court occasionally, and the Governor came once, I think. But certainly none of our guests ever brought anything into the house large enough to hold that shoebox." Again her eyes were drawn toward it. "Why, it wouldn't even fit into an attaché case."

"How about visitors since the judge's death?"

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"None of them could have brought it in," she said, her eyes glistening again. "But there was. . ." Her voice trailed off vaguely.

"Even if you think it can't possibly be relevant, tell me," Loren urged her.

"A man from Ajax Exterminators came to the house a few days after the—the funeral. He said Ben had called the week before and ordered an inspection for termites. The man went through the rooms on the ground floor and then took his tool kit or whatever it was down to the basement. There were no signs of termites, he said."

"*Had* the judge called an exterminator?"

"Not that I knew of, but he had been concerned about the possibility of termites. He could have called from his chambers."

"Did the exterminator go upstairs to the judge's bedroom?"

"He never went upstairs at all," the widow replied firmly. "I was sitting where I could see the stairway every minute."

"Another dead end," Donelson growled. "Professor, I'm afraid the strain of all these questions is getting to be too much for Iris, and we have an appointment with the Governor tonight when she'll have to go over the same ground again." He nodded meaningfully at the deep blue twilight beyond the window wall.

Loren rose from his plastic armchair and stretched. "It *has* been a long session. Let's break it up for tonight, and you can let me know tomorrow what the Governor thinks. Mrs. Richmond, I hope we won't have to impose on your patience like this again. I'll do all I can for you." She clutched his outstretched hand in a clasp of desperation.

At nine Sunday morning Loren went downstairs to fuel himself at the buffet brunch in the hotel dining room, then took a taxi through Capital City's deserted downtown district to the State University. During the two weeks of the summer institute he had just finished teaching, he had learned that the university law library as well as the general library stayed open Sundays during the summer semester.

He spent the rest of the morning in a study cubicle of the law library, reading in consecutive order each decision handed down by the State Supreme Court during Justice Richmond's tenure on the bench. If Richmond had been bribed it had to be in connection with a case where the legal issues were so evenly

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balanced that the decision could have gone either way, and where enough was at stake so that one of the litigants might think the risk of offering a bribe worth taking.

Only one case during Richmond's four months on a far from overworked Supreme Court bench seemed to meet these criteria, an estate contest called *In re Keene's Will.* Loren xeroxed the opinions in the case from a volume of the *Northwestern Reporter* and took the photocopy sheets with him to the general library. He remained in the stacks until closing time, collating the legal aspects of the Keene case with data in the biographical reference books and the microfilmed newspaper files.

Herbert Keene had been born in 1925, the only child of a stockbroker whose world went smash in the Depression. Herbert grew to manhood with a permanent antipathy to the business world but inordinate amounts of oddball inventive genius and gawky charm, a Rube Goldberg mind in a young Henry Fonda body. Women liked to mother him. The first to do so after his biological mother was Joanna Worth who had married him 1953, supported him from her earnings as a secretary while he stayed home puttering with inventions no one wanted, then divorced him after five years and married her less inventive but more affluent boss. Impractical Herbert did not contest the divorce or the property settlement and in fact did not even bother to revoke the will he had executed in 1953 leaving his entire estate to Joanna.

In 1960 Maybelle Coogan had walked up the aisle with Herbert and taken up the task of supporting him while he invented. Selfless Maybelle never thought to suggest that he make a will in her favor, on the reasonable assumption that he'd never have anything worth leaving to her. Impractical Herbert forgot to tell Maybelle about his existing will in favor of his first wife.

After Herbert had slipped on a puddle of oil in his workroom in 1966 and broken his neck, Maybelle had an inspired hunch. She retained a patent agent to evaluate the drawings and working models her late husband had left behind. Among the toy rabbits with battery-powered wiggly ears and the receptacles for barbecuing pizza there was a simple but fool-proof anti-theft system that could be installed in any automobile in the world for less than $20. Impractical Herbert had suddenly become a posthumous millionaire.

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At which point Joanna, the first wife, had gone back to the lawyer who had got her divorces from Herbert and two subsequent husbands. The lawyer had been quite happy to represent her in filing Herbert's 1953 will for probate and arguing that Joanna still retained rights under that will. Maybelle and her attorney had opposed probate, contending that the 1958 divorce and property settlement between Herbert and his first wife had impliedly revoked the will by operation of law so that Joanna now had no claim under the will to any of the proceeds of Herbert's inventions.

The trial court had ruled in favor of Maybelle, refusing to probate the will. Joanna had appealed and the case proceeded to inch its way through the appellate system. The legal issue had never been ruled on in this state and the court had no precedent to control its decision. Finally in November of last year the State Supreme Court had handed down a split decision, four to three, reversing the lower court and upholding the 1953 will. The opinion of the court had been written by Justice Richmond for himself and Justices Schultz, Tuchler, and Blackmar. Chief Judge Phipps had filed a vigorous dissenting opinion in which Justices Goldman and Crockett had joined. Nine weeks after the decision had been rendered, Ben Richmond was dead.

At 10:30 P.M. Loren returned to his hotel room, his eyes aching. He showered and put on pajamas and under the covers was teetering on the brink of sleep when a harsh series of knocks sounded on the door. He cursed, threw off the blanket, and pulled on a robe. Yanking the door open he confronted the angry face of the Lieutenant Governor.

"I've been calling the front desk every half hour since four o'clock to find out if you were back yet," Donelson growled. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Working on the case," Loren said without elaboration. "What happened at the meeting with the Governor?"

"We were in conference on the matter most of the afternoon. I think the Governor would have preferred to—well, to keep it in the official family. But since Iris had already brought you in he reluctantly agreed you should investigate for us—in the utmost secrecy, of course—how that shoebox came to be in Ben Richmond's closet. You will report to me and to me alone. My office

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maintains a cash fund for emergencies and you will be paid any reasonable figure."

"And what happens if I report that Richmond did take a bribe?" Loren demanded.

Donelson sat on the edge of the bed in stony silence for half a minute as if playing out the possibilities in the theater of his mind. "The Governor staked a lot of his personal prestige when he named Richmond to the court," he replied finally. "And with the primaries only a few months away and the Governor badly wanting to be elected for another term, there might be—ah—great pressure to cover up any hint of scandal. One of the reasons I want you to do the investigation is so that I can tell the G—tell anyone pushing for a coverup that you wouldn't let us get away with it."

"On that understanding," Loren said, "count me in." And they shook hands across the rumpled surface of the hotel blanket. "Now, to business. Have you learned anything more about the shoebox and its contents?"

"Well, as I told you yesterday, Lilley's where it came from is an exclusive footwear shop here in the city. The surface of the box is impossible to obtain fingerprints from."

"How do you know that?"

"We asked the commander of the State Police to come to the Governor's office this afternoon and examine it. Of course I had removed the money before showing it to him. The money is now back in the box just as Iris found it and the box is in my private safe in the Executive Office Building."

"Any chance of tracing the box?"

"Not without attracting attention. I think we can reasonably assume that it could have been discarded by any customer of Lilly's at any time."

"How about trying to trace the money?"

"I know almost nothing about Treasury procedure or bank practices but I don't think you can trace money to a particular source, certainly not without calling too much attention to what has to be kept confidential, at least for now." The Lieutenant Governor pulled a wallet from his pocket and a small piece of notepaper from his wallet. "But I made a list of the serial numbers for you, just in case. As you can see, all the fifties are consecutively numbered in one sequence and all the twenties in two separate consecutive sequences."

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"I don't know what good it will do," Loren said, "but thanks anyway. Right now the only thing I want to think about is sleep." He went with Donelson to the door and they shook hands again. "I'll be in touch if I learn something worth reporting."

He woke up with a headache that did not quite conceal the nagging sense at the back of his mind that there was something askew about the case. After a light breakfast he dug the phone directory out of the bureau drawer and looked up the address of the Federal Reserve branch bank in Capital City. He lay back in bed with the pillows propped under him and worked out his plan of approach.

By eleven that morning he was sitting in the opulent corner office of the Federal Reserve's senior vice-president and blithely assuring that rotund and red-faced gentleman that he was a mystery writer researching a story with banking angles.

"Ah, yes, indeed, Mr. Nash." Sanford J. Bissonette tossed his head gleefully up and down like a boy at a Fourth of July picnic bobbing for apples. "We couldn't let any errors creep into your tale, now could we? I'd rather be dead than let that be said of the Fed! Haha, not bad for an amateur wordsmith, eh? Now, exactly what do you need to know?"

"Well," said Loren, "I'm interested in how much information the police, let's say, could obtain about a bill—oh, let's say a bundle of currency found in a corpse's pocket. Could they come to you and find out the history of the bills, whose hands they had gone through, that sort of thing?"

"Only to a very limited extent," Bissonette replied carefully. "Given the serial number on any Federal Reserve note we could tell the police the date the bill had been printed, the date it had passed from the Bureau of Printing and Engraving to a Federal Reserve bank, and the date it had gone from there to a commercial bank and then into circulation. Beyond that point the government requires no record of what happens to a bill and neither do the commercial banks. There is no record chain of title to a piece of currency as there is to a piece of land." The banker allowed a tinge of sadness into his smile. "I do hope I haven't just ruined a story for you."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute." Loren sat bolt upright and groped for the paper tucked into his billfold. "Do you mean that if I gave you the

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serial number of a bill you could tell me an exact date before which no one could possibly have got hold of it?"

Sanford J. Bissonette bobbed up and down affirmatively, like a benevolent jack-in-the-box.

"You just gave me the idea for a story," Loren said excitedly. "Would you mind if I put it to the test? Suppose I give you a few sequences of serial numbers I happen to have noted recently, and you tell me when they were first issued to the public. All right?"

The banker looked dubious for a moment, then brightened again. "Well, it's a slow day, and I've never been a partner in the processes of literary creation before, haha. Let me have your numbers."

Slowly Loren read off the first and last numbers in each of the three sequences that Donelson had given him the night before. Bissonette copied them carefully on a notepad, excused himself, and returned twenty minutes later with the answers neatly penciled on a sheet of the same pad.

"These were fairly new bills," he summarized after reading the relevant dates for each sequence. "As you can see, all of them passed into circulation in December of last year and January this year Does this illustrate for you the information the Fed could give the police in your story?"

"It most certainly does," Loren said abstractedly, and thanked the vice-president profusely and left.

It also, he reflected, killed stone-dead the theory that the winning side in the Keene case had bribed Richmond for a favorable decision, since that decision had been handed down a month before even the earliest of the bills in the shoebox had passed into circulation. On the reasonable presupposition that a man with no whisper of corruption in his past would not have sold out except for hard cash in advance, it was simply impossible for him to have taken this particular money from either side of the Keene litigation prior to the rendering of the decision.

Which suggested, bizarre as it seemed, that someone had paid $50,000 to a judge who not only had already decided the case but might well have been dead.

Waiting in the bank corridor for a Down elevator, Loren formulated a possible answer Clearly the winning side could have had no conceivable reason to slip a post-mortem payoff into Richmond's closet. But suppose the second and losing wife, Maybelle Coogan Keene,

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had had the money sneaked into the judge's house after his death, for the sole purpose of having it discovered later? The universal assumption would be that the winners, the first wife's people, had bribed Richmond *prior to* the decision in Joanna's favor, and the resulting scandal might have forced the reopening of the case. It was plausible enough to be worth following up, Loren decided.

He remembered from the report of the case that Maybelle Keene had been represented by the firm of Chalmers, Gregory & Wardell. Leaving the elevators at the bank's law library on the second floor, he consulted the Martindale-Hubbell directory and learned that the firm was one of the largest and most prestigious in Capital City, with nine partners, twelve associates, and the highest rating. Arthur Chalmers had been in practice 40 years, had served on countless bar association committees, and was the author of a five-volume treatise on wills and estate administration that was on the shelves of virtually every attorney in the state.

Loren taxied back to his hotel and worked up another plan of approach. A detour to the time-encrusted building where the Chalmers firm had its offices, and a memorization of the attorney's name that was lettered bottommost on the entrance door, and the plan was complete. He only hoped that the newest associate with the firm would also turn out to be the most gullible

On Wednesday afternoon, after two days of library research which had unearthed nothing more incriminating to the firm than that it represented a lot of large corporations, Loren sat in the tiny office allotted to the newest associate of Chalmers, Gregory & Wardell. "I'm a free-lance journalist," Loren explained glibly as he had the day before on the phone, "on assignment to do a piece for *Juris Doctor* magazine on opportunities for young lawyers in the North west. Thanks again for giving me an appointment on such short notice. Not to waste any of your valuable time, do you find yourself lost in a big prestigious firm or are you given challenging work and a sense of responsibility?"

Stuart Gibbs adjusted his mod blond hair over the upper third of his ears, peered at Loren through granny glasses, and began discussing his day-to-day activities. Gradually Loren maneuvered the conversation to the subject of recent appellate cases, and eventually had the

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young man reminiscing about the Keene matter.

"Of course," Gibbs said after fifteen minutes, "our client, Maybelle Keene, was entitled by law as surviving spouse to take half of her husband's estate despite any will to the contrary. A spouse's statutory share when there is no will in her favor is provided by law in every state in the country. But after we'd lost the case in the Supreme Court we decided that for tax reasons her best bet was to sell her entire interest to Joanna, Wife One, in return for substantial installment payments which would be spread out so as to minimize the tax bite. I drafted one of the instruments myself. The deal went through shortly after the court's decision against us came down—uh, is something wrong, Mr. Nash?" Stuart Gibbs half rose from his chair with a look of alarm spreading over his earnest young face.

"Acid indigestion," Loren muttered.

Bury one more theory without ceremony, he told himself. For if Maybelle Keene had sold her interest in her late husband's estate shortly after the decision of the court, then neither she nor her attorneys could have had the slightest motive for trying to reopen the litigation, and therefore no motive for planting the shoebox in Richmond's closet after his death.

And so Loren was back where he had started, having established that nobody in the Keene lawsuit could have had anything to do with a bribe, either before or after the death of Ben Richmond.

But then, who *had* been responsible?

Suddenly he realized what had been nagging at the back of his mind

"Let me see your phone book," he said. "Yellow pages, please."

The young lawyer handed him a thick directory across the paper-littered desk. Loren flipped to the F's, then backtracked to the last of the E's. EXTERMINATING AND FUMIGATING. ABC Pest Control, Aardvark Exterminators, Allied, Antimite, Apache, Arco, Benny's Bugsaway. . .*No Ajax Exterminators.* What had nagged him was the thought that the name sounded a bit too much like the names of all the fictitious businesses in all the B movies he'd ever seen. Now he had proof. The "termite inspector" who had visited Mrs. Richmond had been an impostor

And that, he realized when he had had some time to put the whole puzzle together, was

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the clue he needed to tell him who was responsible for the purple shoebox

Late Friday afternoon he sat across a gleaming double-sized walnut desk from the culprit and explained

"It was fair to assume that the person responsible probably had connections with this city, since the shoebox came from a local store. But then I learned two crucial facts: that because of the circulation dates of the bills the money in the shoebox must have been planted in Judge Richmond's closet after his death, and that the man from Ajax Exterminators had been a phony. When I put these two facts together I knew something else about the person behind the scheme—that he must have had access to a great deal of cash on short notice, since clearly his plan had been conceived in the few days between Richmond's death and the fake exterminator's visit—*shortly after the funeral* But more important, the guilty party *must have been close enough to the Richmond household to be aware of the judge's concern about the possibility of termites*, since that was the peg on which the Ajax man's visit hung

"According to Mrs Richmond, the most frequent visitor to the house was you. And you also have access to a lot of cash on short notice, namely the emergency fund from which you offered to pay me."

The Honorable Franklyn Donelson, Lieutenant Governor of the state, sat soldier-straight behind his huge desk, staring vacantly at nothing, his features as unexpressive as the face of a corpse in a casket.

"That wasn't mathematical proof," Loren went on, "but it was enough to send me to the city newspapers where I found the political reporters quite cooperative in view of my rather inflated reputation as some sort of detective. What they told me about the situation in this state confirmed certain implications of our talk Sunday night.

"Richmond was an old crony of the Governor and a lot of the Governor's prestige was riding on his appointments to the Supreme Court. He wants very badly to be renominated in the primary and re-elected in November. But if you could manufacture a scandal around his old crony, maneuver the Governor into covering it up, and then manipulate things so that his coverup was exposed, he'd be destroyed in the primary and you as heir apparent would be frontrunner to take his place You had

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nothing personally against Judge Richmond but you were willing to destroy his reputation and drive his wife, your cousin, to the brink of a nervous breakdown, just so you got your crack at the Governor's mansion.

"It wasn't necessary to your plan that any particular party be framed as the one who offered the bribe, merely that Richmond be framed as the one who received it, and that the Governor be maneuvered into a coverup of a dead friend. You knew it would just be a matter of time before Mrs. Richmond would find the shoebox, and you knew her well enough to be certain she'd come to you and the Governor with it, and you knew the Governor well enough to expect he would take steps to suppress the scandal. Then you'd have him where you wanted him.

"Things started to go wrong for you when Mrs. Richmond brought me into the picture—*against your advice*, she said on Saturday, although when you came to my room Sunday evening you talked about how eager you were to have me investigate for the Governor's office. That about-face on your part bothered me a little all week, until I worked out the truth But what really killed your plan was your use of money that had been printed too recently to have been a bribe to the judge in his lifetime, you said you knew next to nothing about Treasury practice, and that ignorance is going to cost you."

Donelson stirred behind the desk, seemed to come slowly to life. "This is all very interesting, Mensing. Maybe you should spend your summers writing detective stories. But everything you have just said is completely circumstantial. You've slapped together a house of cards conjectures, possibilities, opinions, and all your word against mine. Against the word of the second most powerful man in this state."

"It was your word against mine until last night," Loren said. "I haven't told you yet how I worked out your means of getting the shoebox into Richmond's closet. The phony exterminator *alone* couldn't have done it, because Mrs. Richmond told us he had inspected only the ground floor and the basement but had not gone upstairs. So someone else must have picked up the box, from the basement where Mr. Ajax had probably hidden it, and then planted the box in the judge's closet. It was a neat two-step operation. And from Mrs. Richmond's account Saturday the only person in a

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position to carry out the second part of the plan was the maid, Angela Kramer."

Loren paused significantly. "I got a sworn statement from Miss Kramer late yesterday evening and both it and she are now where you can't reach them." He took a photocopy of an affidavit from his jacket and tossed the sheets in Donelson's direction.

The Lieutenant Governor did not even raise a hand to catch them. He seemed to have wilted in his chair. The papers fluttered to the carpet.

"I don't know if technically you committed any crimes or not," Loren said. "Despite my profession, legal technicalities don't interest me that much. You were willing to hurt people who hadn't harmed you in order to increase your own power. I know that's the name of the game in politics but right now, between you and me, I'm changing the rules on you.

"You've got two weeks to resign your office, get out of public life, and stay out. You can plead ill health or anything else you want. If you don't, I'll squash you. That's more of a chance than you gave Iris Richmond. I'm going out to her place now and tell her the truth. If anything should happen to me, or Mrs. Richmond, or Angela Kramer, or her boy friend whom you hired to play Mr. Ajax, I've made arrangements for the newspapers and TV networks to get the whole story."

Donelson shook his head from side to side like a punchdrunk fighter. "Why?" he muttered, staring down at the glittering empty surface of his desk. "You won't change the world, Mensing. The way things are never changes. Whoever replaces me will have climbed the ladder the same way I did."

"Because I'm like Judge Richmond," Loren said. "I don't like termites in the foundation, and I'm not ready to give up the house to them yet. Don't make me come back." And he rose and strode across the twilight-blue sea of carpet and slammed the door behind him.

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a *NEW* short story by

FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

Florence V. Mayberry has that rare quality of being able to get under the skin of her characters—and under the skin of her readers, too. Here again is the Nevada scene she knows so well, with its curious mixture of sentiment and realism. A voice in the mind, and bittersweet thoughts . . .

A GOODBYE SOUND

by FLORENCE V. MAYBERRY

"Shut up, Joe," I said. "You bore me."

Joe looked as if he would cry. I can't stand a man who goes around all the time looking as if he could cry. Joe's that kind.

"Well—" He cleared his throat, a nasty, fluttering sound. It was too bad, I knew it was wrong, but Joe couldn't take a deep breath without irritating me. "Why can't you look at me like you do at everybody else? Like just smile nice at me sometimes. Like for instance you don't even know those guys standing over there, they're just waiting for a table and you never saw them before, just happened to look their way. And you give 'em a big smile like you were the hostess out here." A hesitation. "Or maybe you do know them."

"Whether I do or not is not your affair. Now listen, Joe, you've been after me to go out with you for months. So I'm out. With you. So why not cool it, lay off the witness-box stuff."

"Sure, okay, Lolly."

"Laura!"

"Okay, Laura."

What's a woman to do with a man like that? *Roll over and play dead, Joe, sit up and beg, Joe, fetch me my slippers, Joe.*

"Order anything you like, hon, the world's yours tonight."

"The prime ribs, please."

"Yeah, that's good, that's

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the ticket, best thing on the menu. Hon, you can have prime ribs every day, every night, if you'd only want it that way I just finished a quarter-million-dollar contract, Lol—Laura. Your old man—" He choked it off, trying to laugh. "I mean your old ex-husband is in the bigtime contracting now Kept slogging along until I made it."

"Maybe I ought to go back in court and try for alimony this time. First time it would have been like suing a four-year old kid for his nickels." *That's right, ruin his fun, be mean, you shrew*

"I told you, if you'd only hang on a little while, maybe make me feel like I was something, I'd make it." He tried to laugh again, but it was like the laugh was hiding behind a door, afraid to come out. "I'm slow, hon But right along with that, I'm too dumb to know how to give up."

That was for sure. He's telling me? Divorced two years and every week, regular as clockwork Joe telephoned *Hon, let's try it again, willya, Lolly, willya just go out to dinner with me and talk a while? I get terrible lonesome, you gotta eat anyway Hon, do you need any money, I gotta few bucks ahead, construction's picking up Hon, hon,* over and over So once in a while I gave in, like throwing a dog a bone Damn a man like that Who needs his money? I make plenty doing beauty work

"Prime ribs for the lady Medium-rare, same as usual, hon? Baked potatoes, all the fixings Same for me. Don't give the lady no coffee till later, she drinks it with dessert That still right, hon?"

A crawly feeling shivered my back, crept into my jaw My teeth started to chatter Nerves, I mean, like before a fit

The food came, beautiful stuff because we were at Eugene's where it's maybe the best in Reno, but I looked at it like it was poison. Joe did that to me, always. He didn't mean to, but he did. Slender I always was, but by the time Joe and I broke up I was nothing but skinny Chemical reaction, maybe. Or maybe I'm just mean. But I think it's more than that. I'm a one-man woman

I never should have married Joe. My fault, of course, because I knew I shouldn't and he didn't. That's why I stuck it out with him for three years and then let him hang around these past two years No woman ought to marry a man when she loves someone else she can't have.

"Joe, are you still smacking your mouth after every swallow? You come to a swell place

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like this and still eat like you're in a truck-stop diner."

"Sorry, Lol—Laura. Hon, I keep telling you, I need a nice woman to shape me up, make something out of me. All I do any more is hang around with guys. Honest, Laura, you're the only one. I tried going out with other women but it's no use. Not after you."

See what I mean? What he should have done was reach that big paw of his across the table, smack me hard, and walk out. Never phone again. And I tell you, that would have been a big relief, no more anticipating that call every week, trying to think up new ways to say no.

"Eat up, hon, come on, tear into that meat. Or you'll get skinny again, like you were after—"

"I don't want to talk about it, Joe."

"You should of kept the baby, Laura, maybe that's what turned you bitter. I wouldn't of cared it wasn't mine, anything yours is mine far as I'm concerned. You should never have—"

"Damn you to hell!" Whispered, so the tables around couldn't hear. "You dumb stubborn ox, you still believe I'm a murderer! That I deliberately killed my darling baby, my poor lost baby! How many times do I need to tell you I *wanted* that baby?"

"Well, hon, I wouldn't of cared it wasn't mine. I told you that when you told me about it, right from the start. You were honest with me, and I said if it's yours, why, I'd love it no matter who it looked like."

Maybe now you won't keep thinking I'm the witch you started out thinking I was. Who wouldn't act like a witch, getting reminded every day that I loved someone I couldn't have? Besides hanging onto the conviction I had murdered my unborn baby. It was a miscarriage, not an abortion. Joe was determined not to believe that, perhaps in the hope that I had deliberately rid myself of my last attachment to Chris. Well, he was wrong. It was a miscarriage. My baby's silly mother cried too much.

"I like Chris myself, Laura, I wouldn't of cared. Because I understood why you went for the guy, you just a green kid and him knowing how to handle women. Only when you found out he was married you should of broke it off. But that's the trouble, women get took in by a good line, him throwing money around, regular guys don't have a chance."

"Joe, I have to go. I don't feel well."

"Aw, hon, we barely started eating—"

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"You stay, Joe. Eat yours and mine, too. And don't call me again. Ever. Just leave me alone." I got up, skimmed past the tables and waiters, fast.

It felt good in the open air, a nice warm night, the moon big and bright. The white clean moonshine seemed to shower me off, wipe away what Joe stirred up, and I stopped wanting to cry. Nevada's moon, I think, must be the most beautiful on earth, so brilliant, so white. I felt like diving into its glow, swimming in it.

"You're moon mad," Chris used to tell me. Then he would say in his soft, gentle voice, slurred by a Danish accent, "So am I, little Laura, when I see you in the moonlight and hold you in my arms." How many millions of men have said those same dumb words to how many millions of dumb girls? So it wasn't the words, it was the way Chris said it.

A taxi moved up to me, ready for a passenger. I opened the door and got in. But I couldn't close the door because Joe was holding it, all 200 pounds of him. "Hon, why take a cab when I gotta car? I'll pay the guy his fare, he won't lose nothing. Listen, hon, you gotta eat something— Listen, fella, I'm not taking your fare, here's a couple bucks, come on, Lol—Laura."

Two couples going inside the restaurant stared at us. One of the women looked like a customer of the beauty salon where I worked. And it was so dumb, squabbling in front of Eugene's. So I got out and let Joe lead me to his big car. A good one but all dusty, with rope and a can of oil in the back, and papers, chewing-gum wrappers, and gravel on the floor in front.

"I know what you're thinking, Laura, didn't wash his car before he picked me up. Well, hon, I been out on the job, way off the paved roads, in soft dirt. So I got to carry extra oil and a rope in case. And I barely got back tonight, tore back like crazy, didn't want to disappoint you, hahaha!"

The poor guy. Oh, God, the poor guy.

"How about a little run up to Virginia City, hon? It's warm down here tonight, be cooler up there. Those old ghosts chill the place off, huh, hahaha!"

"Okay."

Might as well. I wasn't going to get rid of Joe any more than you can break a bulldog's hold on something he's locked his jaws on by smacking his rump. I switched on the car radio, the knobs gritty under my fingers, put it on loud so Joe would need to shout to be heard; a man can't shout forever.

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Lovely music, a great "mood" program, bittersweet, haunting. It drowned out Joe and I spun out with it, far out. It was easy to forget it was Joe beside me, he was merely a broad-shouldered male figure. But pretty soon, dreaming with the music, he was more than that. He was Chris.

Chris beside me while we zoomed along, not toward Virginia City but toward Carson City and Lake Tahoe. Five years ago. A time when I barely knew Joe—he was only one of the men who worked for Chris. Once in a while we would bump into him and other employees of Chris in some night spot. And they would all cluster around Chris as if he were a magnet and they were iron filings. The same way I did.

I try and try to figure out why Chris was so attractive to everyone. But I never can put it in words. He simply was. Sitting beside him could put me on a cloud, soft and gentle, yet somehow firm and secure at the same time. His voice was so tender. Once I heard him speak when he was angry, not to me but to a stranger who tried to dance with me. Even then his voice was tender, a velvet-covered steel trap closing gently, but unstoppably, around the man.

In size he wasn't as big as Joe. But he exuded a mountain feeling, a mountain covered with grass and the sun streaming over it. A dopey woman in love? True. Absolutely true.

Joe shouted over the music and drove away Chris and my dream. "How about you and me trying it again, Laura, whaddaya say? You're acting like you're a million miles away. Put your mind on me a little bit, hon."

"Joe, turn around. I don't want to go up to Virginia City. Tomorrow's a big day at the beauty shop and we're shorthanded. Turn back to Reno at Steamboat Springs."

"Aw-w-w-w, hon! Just when I'm feeling good, you back beside me. Listen, take tomorrow off. I'll give you whatever it takes to make up your lost pay."

"I don't need your money, Joe."

"Please." His voice was uneven, shaky. "I need to be a little happy once in a while."

So I said, okay, okay, and we went up the steep climb from the valley, around the last bend, into Virginia City. Tourists ambled up and down the long main street, gawking at the store windows, going in and out of the fake oldtime saloons, laughing as if it was a ball, you know, gay like fun. And all the time it was nothing but an old

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dead town, faked up for dollars. It gave me the creeps. Like watching people laugh in a funeral parlor while they ogled a fancy old-fashioned coffin.

We got out of the car and drifted with the crowd, Joe hanging onto my arm. But even with the crowd, with the tinpanny piano music coming out of a bar and Joe trying to make talk, I couldn't stop being back with Chris. The thought of him simply wouldn't go away. It wiped out Virginia City, Joe, everything.

Chris, darling, are we going to be married? Someday, I mean.

Little girl, don't worry, let me take care of that. Don't you worry your pretty head about that. I have problems. I need to handle those problems first.

I'm sorry to bother you, Chris, it's just I love you so. I suppose a girl shouldn't keep telling a man how much she loves him but it's the way I feel. I'm no good at pretending.

He had patted my hand then, tenderly, almost as a father would pat his daughter, and said that was why he loved me, my eyes so deep and true, they couldn't lie, nor those sweet lips—

"Wanta go inside one of the joints, Lol—hon? Have us a little fun?"

"Damn!" I said. "I'd as soon dance on somebody's grave."

Joe's jaw dropped and his eyes turned moist. Poor guy, poor guy. Why couldn't he just fade away, leave me alone?

"It's Chris," he finally said. "I can tell. You're thinking about Chris again. When you gonna get him out of your system? After the way he done you dirt."

"He didn't! I was twenty-one. I can take my own blame."

"Hon, you were nothing but a dumb little kid, barely twenty-one. What's twenty-one mean, it ain't magic. And Chris close to forty, smart, wheeling and dealing with Nevada's big shots, knowing all the angles."

"Take me home!"

"Okay, hon, have it your way. But I still think it was a damn shame, leaving you so mixed up you can't love nobody but him."

"Shut up, Joe!" *Shut up, shut up, shut up, why tell me what I know too well?* I'm like my great-grandmother and she was Indian, full-blooded. Outside I'm blonde as a Scandinavian, but inside of me I'm Indian. And Indians don't change loyalties easily; when they get set on an idea, that's it. Forever. At least that's what I've heard. Anyway, that's how I am. For me, Chris is it, and always will be.

Joe did what I said, shut up,

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led me back to the car, and we headed for Reno. The moonlight turned the night into a twilight, only more shimmering, just as it was the night Chris and I drove to Tahoe. Our last night together. I remembered I had leaned close to the windshield, let the moonlight bathe my face, smiled at Chris. So he drove off on a side road and took my face in his hands. "My beautiful little girl," he said.

"Yes, Chris."

He kissed me, then drew my face back to the windshield, into the moonlight. "No wonder you love moonlight, little Laura, you're moonbeams made flesh. This is how I want to remember you. Always."

Something was wrong about the way Chris said that. A strange inflection, a goodbye sound. As though he had dropped a pebble into a well that I had expected to be full, but there was no splash. Lost. Gone. A goodbye sound.

I swallowed hard to keep back a question about that, because something told me I didn't want the answer. I've heard, too, that Indians are psychic. Anyway, I didn't ask. I smiled instead. If some crazy thing was going to happen, if I was going to lose Chris, I didn't want him to remember ugliness.

Chris drove back to the highway, and that night I think we dropped into every night-spot around the Lake. Joe showed up in one of the clubs and then kept following us from place to place, hanging onto us like a burr. Truth is, Chris seemed to encourage him. He would have had to, otherwise Joe wouldn't have stayed. Chris knew how to get rid of people he didn't want around.

Once I whispered, "Tell Joe to get lost." But Chris only patted my hand and said, "Who can blame the man? He's in love with you. Who wouldn't be in love with you?"

Without any thought it popped out. "Maybe you wouldn't, Chris." Was that my Indian great-grandmother coming out in me, knowing the way all primitive people know?

We kept dancing, Chris silent. Finally he said, "Little girl, you've picked up the feeling of what I have to tell you tonight. Not all, but part. I do love you. But tonight is goodbye for us. Our last time together. That's why I want to remember your face, everything about you. Darling, it has to be. The end, I mean."

"Why?" It was a weak, strangled sound.

"I've learned in business, no use explaining. When the end comes, face it, quick, sharp, no

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turning back. It's simply I have too many involvements, business, everything. It won't work out." He bent and kissed my forehead.

My head floated up among the colored, spangly lights, my body a numbed automaton on the dance floor below. Then my head fell back on my body, and all of me was numb, too numb to be surprised that a smile had frozen on my face. Who wants to remember a tear-streaked face?

"Dance with Joe, little sweetheart, he's been waiting for that all evening," Chris said, when we went back to our table.

Joe stood up and looked at Chris as if he was going to lick his hand. My smile was still frozen as Joe led me back to the dance floor. Over his shoulder I watched Chris call the waiter, speak to him. Then he looked toward me, smiled, nodded his head approvingly, turned and left. Just left. That's all.

The numbness suddenly went away and I started falling into a black pit. I clung hard to Joe while I was doing it, and he squeezed back. "Aw, honey, what's this? Huh? You go for me a little bit?"

I shook my head.

"I sure wish you would, baby. Just a little, you know, like at least be friendly."

"Chris has left me," I said. "So I'm dead. Mind playing hearse and taking me home?" My voice sounded flat and far off, like someone else talking.

Joe's head swung toward our table. "You mean he's gone?" I nodded. A wide happy grin spread over his face. "Gone," he said with satisfaction. "Well, now let's you and me have some fun for ourselves. We don't care if—"

"I care," I said. "Please take me home."

Joe led me back to our table. The waiter came over and said, "The gentleman with you said to bring you anything you want, it's his party, all paid for."

"Laura, honey, the night's young. And the first time, me with you, Chris doing this for us. It's like a dream, lemme dream a while."

"Take me home, Joe. Otherwise I'll call a cab."

Now, all these years later, I was telling him again, *Take me home, Joe.* Time hadn't changed anything.

We curved down the mountain from Virginia City, saw the valley spangled with lights, and Reno a shimmer of neon toward the north.

"Hon, didja hear what happened today? You musta, the way you're all sunk into yourself tonight."

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"Hear what?"

"Chris got divorced today."

It couldn't be true. It was a crazy made-up daydream, an idiot fantasy that fairy tales come true.

"His wife finally got onto him. Took him for a bundle."

Good. Take every dime. That way I can prove it's Chris I want, not money.

"I'm really sorry, Lol—Laura. Honest. You may of always thought I only cared about what I wanted. Like, only wanting to hang onto you. But honest, all along I felt bad for you, the way you were hook, line, and sinker for Chris. He wasn't worth all that, not that he ain't a great guy. That is, with guys. But not worth all that grief. From you."

"Well, you don't have to be sorry for me any longer, Joe." All the sad five years of waiting for something I never expected to get wiped out! Because here it was, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Laughter bubbled out of me—the first time I had laughed like that since Chris went away. "Not any more, Joe!"

"Gee, hon, that's great. Really great." I looked at Joe affectionately. He was kind, actually sweet, to be glad just because I was glad.

"You see, I was afraid you'd be all broke up. I mean, I figured you'd been holding onto the hope that someday you and Chris would finally make it. Then when he got his divorce today and right off married that kooky kid from New York. I mean, right today. I figured you'd take it hard."

The valley's lights went out. Blown out the way one blows out an oil lamp. When they came back on, they were blurred and my head was dizzy.

"But since you're taking it good like this, maybe I got a chance with you after all."

Keep talking, Joe, so I don't have to.

"Hon, I'll never stop loving you. You're so beautiful. I mean, looking at you sideways like now, you're like a beautiful statue or something. Honest, when I first saw you with Chris, it kinda made me sick, you so young and little and pretty."

To disinfect a wound, split it wide and rub salt in it. I may die from it, but the wound will be clean.

"Joe, is this true? Or are you making it up to try to make me forget Chris?"

He looked stunned. "Why would I make up a thing like that? Anyways, you could check, couldn't you? Oh, Lord, you're not taking it cool after all. But you'd have to find out sometime. Honest, I thought maybe you'd already heard."

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"How did you find out?"

"Hell, I do business with Chris. See him all the time. So today late, when I first got in from the job, I went to his office about something. And Chris invited me to the party he's throwing tonight, even introduced me to the kid he just married, she was there, that's how I know she's kooky, giggling and crawling all over Chris."

"Where's the party?"

"I'm not going. Gee, hon, think I'd take you home and run off to that party?"

"I'm going to the party. Take me, Joe."

"Now, listen, that's no good, you got a bad sound in your voice, you don't want—"

"Take me to the party, Joe."

"Hell!" Joe said.

The party was at the Mapes Hotel in a private suite, the door wide open, come-one-come-all, so we walked right in. Flowers were everywhere, in baskets, in vases, gift cards thrusting from them. The room smelled like a funeral. When my father died, the funeral parlor smelled exactly like this wedding party.

The guests, laughing, milling around, were only a moving color-dotted blur. And in the center of the blur was Chris, sharp and clear, with a small blur beside him that bounced and jiggled and swung on his arm. Chris looked just the same. Smiling, eyes blue as the sky after a good clean rain. Stocky, strong. And he saw me. As Joe and I came in, he was looking toward the door.

Chris dropped the bouncing blur off his arm and walked to us. He kept smiling. Smiles, I knew from five years before, don't really mean anything. "Hello, little girl," he said. "It's been a long time." Tender, loving voice. I had to bite my lips to keep them from trembling. "I hoped you would come to wish me happiness."

The small blur skipped over to us and caught hold of Chris. It shook its shaggy curls from its little heart-shaped face, came out of the blur, pursed its mouth into a pout, and asked, "Aren't you going to introduce wifey, hubby-doll-boy?"

Hubby-doll-boy introduced us. "Valerie, these are special friends, Laura and Joe Walker. You've already met Joe, remember? At the office. Joe used to work for me but now he's my competitor, a real great guy."

Joe stepped forward, grinning, pleased. "Congratulations, you two. Yeah. May you look as good on your fiftieth anniversary."

"Oooo, super, isn't that darling, Chrissy, just super

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darling!" Valerie cooed.

Chris took my hand. It shouldn't have sent an electric shock through me. But it did. "And little Laura is a very special lady I've known a long time. A lovely *lady.*" Emphasis on *lady.*

Valerie's big brown eyes narrowed as she looked me over. "Oooo, lovely, just simply lovely-lovely. Chrissy angel, kiss me, I've not been kissed for five whole minutes, m-m-m-!" She stood on tiptoe, holding up her face, nuzzling the air. Chris bent and kissed her, red creeping over his face. "Mm-mm-mm, not that way, Daddy, big-big kiss!"

He kissed her again and she snuggled against him. Then he did it another time, on his own, a long hard kiss. He didn't have to do that. He could have waited until I couldn't see him.

I began to hear the voice. Not a real voice. Not mine or anybody's. Just a voice in my mind. It said, *I'm going to kill Chris, then I'll kill myself.* Flat, no anger, simply a fact.

I didn't argue with the voice. Why argue with what had to be? But I began to think, how? Should I use fingernails? The heel of my shoe? Hit him with a compact, stab him with a lipstick, choke him with a five-dollar bill? Those were my weapons.

Joe grabbed my arm and led me to the buffet spread. "Eat something, hon, you're kinda sick looking, you oughta eat something."

"Maybe some water."

"It ain't healthy not to eat."

No knives on the buffet table. Forks, but can a fork stab deep enough to kill? The cake cutter? Nothing but dull prongs.

My knees started to tremble and I went to a chair and sat down. A standup ashtray was beside the chair. Light metal, hollow inside. Put a bump on the head, nothing more. I tried to think what my Indian great-grandmother would have done. Latched onto some brave's bow and arrow, or a tomahawk. A shotgun, if one was around. But her great-granddaughter wouldn't know how to pull the trigger on a gun if one was in her lap.

Chris was watching me over the top of Valerie's shaggy little head. Still smiling, but not comfortable. Uneasy. I never saw Chris uneasy before. He turned his eyes away, too quickly. Guilty.

Joe touched my shoulder, leaned down and whispered, "Hon, don't keep staring at Chris that way, you're giving the guy the creeps. After all, it's his wedding night, he ought to be let to be happy."

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Why, I wanted to ask, just why? But that would have taken strength. I wanted to save all my strength to do what I had to do, before Chris left. Already he and Valerie were going around to their guests, bidding good night, Valerie giggling, snuggling. Chris moving quickly, in a hurry, people making cracks about that. Finally they headed in my direction.

"Go away, Joe," I said. "This is between Chris and me."

"Now, Lol—Laura—"

"Go away."

He shuffled off miserably. Then the bridal couple came to me, the last one in the room. I stood up, my weapon ready. Say it loud, scream it. *Chris, you never saw our son. I grieved about losing him as well as his father. He never drew breath, but do you suppose in some other world he wonders what happened to his father and what made his mother cry so much?*

"Good night, Laura. Please wish us well."

I opened my mouth. "How—" *How does our son feel about us?* I swallowed. "How—how nice to see you again, Chris."

It wasn't easy, but I smiled. Smiles don't mean anything but they're not ugly. It's better not to remember ugliness. "I wish you well."

They turned, walked away, out of the room, out of my life. Gone. Would that be the same as dead?

Joe shuffled back. "Come on, hon, let's go, you look all in. Hey, maybe you could eat a hamburger or something now. You know I worry about you, Lol—Laura."

"Joe, don't waste your time and feelings on me."

His face screwed up like an ugly baby's who isn't sure whether to cry or not. "I wish I could stop. But some things you can't help."

I knew about that. That I understood.

"Okay, Joe. Buy me a hamburger."

So Joe and I went downstairs to the coffee shop and had hamburgers. Like maybe a funeral feast?

"Q"

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a *NEW* detective story by

PRONZINI and WALLMANN

Bill Pronzini's detective stories, with or without collaboration—in this instance, partnership with Jeffrey Wallmann—are definitely taking a "locked room" turn, at least in the contributions to EQMM. Well, we don't mind: a good locked-room "miracle problem" is always welcome. This newest one is an ingenious variation of the theme. It stumped Captain Fabian and Lieutenant Conroy, and it may stump you. But to Patrolman Gallagher it was the chance of a lifetime—almost. . .

THE HALF-INVISIBLE MAN

by BILL PRONZINI and JEFFREY WALLMANN

Patrolman Fred Gallagher stood at his posted position outside the slightly open door of Room 103 in the fashionable Whitewater Motel and listened to Lieutenant Owen Conroy reviewing with Captain of Detectives Philip Fabian the details of the murder that had been committed there earlier that day.

For the past few years Gallagher had been assigned to clerical duties at Headquarters, so that he would be readily available as a driver for the ranking officials of the Detective Squad. He had driven Lieutenant Conroy to the Whitewater in response to this particular squeal and had been stationed on guard in front of Room 103 since their arrival some four hours before. He had during that time seen the body of the dead man, Aaron Maddox; and had silently observed—no one had bothered to speak to him, or it seemed even to look at him—the coming of the lab crew and the Assistant Medical Examiner and the ambulance attendents, their eventual departure, and then the arrival of Captain Fabian.

As he had thought oc-

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casionally in the past, he thought now that it was as if he had done little in his nearly three decades on the metropolitan police force except stand outside hotel and motel rooms, apartments, private chambers in everything from mansions to hovels—glimpsing through doorways every conceivable type of crime man could perpetrate against his fellowman. He was a kind of uninvolved, perpetually detached observer, like one of the morbidly curious who always congregated at the scene of any violent happening—to all concerned a familiar blue uniform instead of a human being named Fred Gallagher.

A half-invisible man.

He was lean and fair-skinned, with ordinary features and mild brown eyes. Three weeks earlier he had celebrated his fiftieth birthday—without celebration and completely alone, because he had never married and had no relatives in this city or state. Fifty years old and 27 years a cop, 27 years a patrolman. He had grown up in the tenements of Baltimore and the bunkers of World War II, and had taken and passed his civil service exams shortly after being discharged from the Army.

He possessed a keen native intelligence, but his was the kind of mind which did not easily assimilate academic knowledge; this fact, coupled with lack of funds, had kept him from considering college. Too, he was a quiet, passive, deferential individual by nature. As a result, the new breed of police officer, with their civic zeal, scientific specialization, university and Police Academy training, had been consistently promoted over him. Once he had been bitter about it; now he was merely tired and resigned.

He shifted his weight to ease the chronic ache in his legs—owing, of all things, to varicose veins. While the lab crew had been going over the room, Lieutenant Conroy, who was three years Gallagher's junior, had taken notice of him long enough to ask ritualistically and with conscious or unconscious patronage if he wanted a chair. As always, Gallagher had politely declined. He was tired and resigned, yes—and it was true that the daily donning of his crisply pressed, button-shiny uniform had become a cheerless routine—but he still maintained a certain measure of pride. He would take what life and his chosen profession had dealt to him standing up, not sitting down.

Listening to the Lieutenant and the Captain talking inside, Gallagher forced his thoughts

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away from personal reflection and occupied his mind by visualizing the room. It was spacious, low-ceilinged, and no doubt similar to all the other units in the U-shaped motel complex. Three of the walls were paneled in walnut veneer. The fourth, directly opposite the hall entrance, was three-quarters glass window and sliding-glass door, looking out onto a flagstone terrace and center courtyard, and one-quarter built-in wardrobe whose left side abutted the wall separating Room 103 from Room 105.

The wardrobe's lower half consisted of six drawers, and the left half was a closet with its roller door open to reveal nothing but an empty wooden clothes rod. In the center of the room on that side was an extra-wide double bed, and against the outer wall was a long slender writing desk.

The other half of the room, adjoining 101, contained a luggage rack with Maddox's suitcase open on it, a television set on a wall bracket, a single armchair and reading lamp, and the door to the bathroom.

The sound of Conroy's voice told Gallagher that the Lieutenant was pacing back and forth on the maroon-colored carpet. Conroy was a small, dark, intense man who had a great deal of nervous energy. Captain Fabian—heavy-set, with gray eyes half-closed as if in constant meditation—was apparently sitting in the armchair. Fabian did not usually come out into the field, but this particular murder case had so mystified Conroy that he'd deemed it necessary to call the Captain in for consultation.

Conroy was saying now, "According to the desk clerk, Hedwig, Maddox had just checked in about ten minutes before he was shot. He hadn't had time to do much of anything except open his suitcase and take off his sports jacket."

"How many people heard the shot, Owen?"

"The occupants of the two rooms adjacent, both of whom are definite suspects—Gordon Severin in 105 and Ralph Oakley in 101. The desk clerk, Hedwig, heard it, too; he was the first one to respond."

"Hedwig can see the door to this room from the front desk, right?"

"Right. The angle of the desk in the lobby allows him a clear view of this entire wing, from Rooms 101 to 111."

"Were there any people in the lobby or outside in the courtyard who might've seen something?"

"Not that we've found so

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far. Quite a few of the rooms are vacant at the moment."

"Okay, go ahead."

"Well, Hedwig came running to investigate the shot and Oakley from Room 101 joined him at the door maybe thirty seconds later. When they couldn't get an answer from in here by beating on the door panel, Hedwig tried the knob; it was locked from the inside. He used his passkey to open up, and they found Maddox sprawled across the bed, shot through the left temple.

"Severin from 105 put in an appearance then, delayed because he says he was taking a shower; he was dressed in a bathrobe and his hair was wet, though that doesn't necessarily corroborate his claim. Anyway, Hedwig locked the door again and called us immediately. He swears no one touched anything in here."

"The sliding-glass door was also locked from the inside?" Fabian asked.

"Right. The safety bolt, the kind the insurance companies require these days, was firmly in place. We checked for jimmy marks, and as you saw there aren't any. As well, there's no handle or lock on the outside and the frame has tight-fitting grooves. There just isn't any way that bolt could have been moved from outside. And with Hedwig at the front desk, there isn't any way the killer could have gone out the hall door and not have been seen."

Gallagher heard Fabian get to his feet and open the bathroom door; then: "What about the window in here?"

"Also closed and locked from the inside," Conroy told him.

The bathroom door clicked shut. "Hedwig and Severin and Oakley all agree that the shot definitely came from *inside* this room?"

"They do, although none of them was able to pinpoint from exactly where in the room."

"And yet you found the murder gun *outside*, on the terrace."

"Yeah, lying about ten feet beyond the locked glass door. You can see why I'm so damned baffled, Phil."

"Well, there's got to be an answer, that much is sure. Anything from Arms Registration on the gun?"

"It isn't registered. It's a .22 caliber Smith and Wesson Target, and as you know that kind of weapon can be bought in a hundred sporting-goods stores without showing identification." Conroy's voice took on a sardonic edge. "This isn't New York State, unfortunately."

"No prints, of course."

"Wiped clean."

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"Lab crew didn't find anything at all? In the room?"

"No. They went over the room half a dozen times, and there wasn't a single thing to indicate how the murder was committed. They found a few latent prints belonging to the maid, and also one of Maddox's thumb on the handle inside the glass door. That's it."

"No signs of a struggle?"

"None. Everything was in its place. Oh, the bed was slightly rumpled where Maddox had fallen across it, and his jacket was on the floor of the closet along with a couple of clothes hangers, but otherwise the room was exactly as the maid had left it after preparing it this morning."

"Maddox's print on the sliding-door handle means he must have opened it either for a breath of air or to step out onto the terrace for a look around."

"I considered that," Conroy said, "but there still isn't any way the murderer could have come in through that door, shot Maddox, and then bolted the door on the inside after going out again."

"You searched Severin's and Oakley's rooms and belongings?"

"We did. Same story—not a thing that could even remotely be construed as incriminating or illuminating."

There was the sound of a match being struck, and Gallagher knew Captain Fabian had lit his flame-scarred pipe; he could hear the sound of it drawing, like little gusts of wind from within the room.

Fabian said then, "Oakley and Severin were business associates of the dead man?"

"Yes. The three of them were partners in a small New York investment counseling firm—O.S.M. Consultants. Until two years ago it was called Oakley and Severin Consultants; then Maddox bought a partnership and convinced the other two to streamline the title. He was glib and persuasive, I've been told, a real ball of fire. He'd put together a small fortune through wildcat speculations, and said he was now ready to play it closer to the vest and therefore wanted the respectability of a well-established and conservative firm. If Harrison Caulder's accusations are correct, though, Maddox either changed his mind in midstream or had an ulterior motive from the beginning."

"What about this Caulder?"

"Retired businessman and investor, whose account was handled by Severin before Maddox joined the firm; then Maddox took it over, at Caulder's insistence, because

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Caulder was impressed by Maddox's energy and drive. Lately, Caulder had become suspicious of the handling of his investments, and yesterday he discovered through a broker in New York that stocks recently bought for him by O.S.M. were on the questionable side, worth nowhere near the money he paid for them.

"Caulder knew the three partners would be staying here at the Whitewater, so he came to confront them last night. Maddox wasn't here yet, but Caulder had words—very strong words—with Oakley and Severin. They begged him not to do anything rash until they had opportunity to talk to Maddox; Oakley told him that if his accusations were valid, Maddox was the only one who could have engineered any fraud."

"Just how would his alleged fraud benefit Maddox personally?"

"The way I got it, by buying these non-Board stocks he could arrange kickbacks from the quasi-legitimate companies involved—all of which were siphoned into his own pocket. So if true, he was not only cheating O.S.M. clients but milking the firm itself of its reputation. From what Oakley told me, reputation is the lifeblood of any investment counseling or brokerage outfit, and this kind of duplicity could mean total ruin. In other words, even though Oakley and Severin were innocent in the matter, and made restitution, their firm could still go under."

A few moments of silence. Then the striking of another match reached Gallagher's ears; Fabian's pipe had gone out. Gallagher lifted one glossy black shoe, then the other, to alleviate the pain in his legs.

Captain Fabian said at length, "How long have Severin and Oakley been here at the Whitewater?"

"Two days."

"For what reason?"

"They came to try to persuade a couple of large investors who lived in this area to transfer their accounts to O.S.M. They had to settle for the Whitewater instead of one of the larger downtown hotels because of the state political convention now going on."

"Why didn't Maddox come with them initially?"

"He was working with another client in Albany."

"Was Caulder here at the time of the shooting?"

"He says he wasn't, but he can't prove it," Conroy answered. "He'd been here about an hour before Maddox's arrival, for another talk with Oakley and Severin, and then claims to

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have gone for a walk in the neighborhood to work off some of his steam before seeing Maddox; he returned shortly after we arrived. I've got men out now checking for possible corroborative witnesses."

"Tell me something about Oakley and Severin and Caulder—your impressions, any personal facts you were able to dig out."

"Well, Ralph Oakley is sixty-one, a widower without children—sententious, ultra-conservative. His hobby is solving acrostics and cryptograms and the like, which may or may not mean anything; I learned that from Severin. I got the feeling Oakley never quite approved of Maddox, but was shrewd enough to realize he and Severin had to have fresh and enthusiastic blood if the firm was to attract new prospects; that was why they allowed Maddox to buy in."

"Caulder's accusations must have hit him hard, then."

"Right. And Severin as well, although he's a quiet and introspective type who doesn't display much of what he feels or thinks. He's forty-eight, and lives on Long Island with his wife. Pretty much of a homebody, doesn't drink or smoke; Oakley says Severin makes knick-knacks out of wood and things in his spare time. In his own way he's just as conservative as Oakley; and he also didn't seem to approve of Maddox.

"Caulder, on the other hand, is waspish and highly excitable. He worked himself into a rage while I was interviewing him, the usual flap about police harassment. He's divorced and fifty-five, something of a swinger to hear him tell it, and prides himself on being neat and well-dressed; those latter two facts, he says, are additional reasons why he took to Maddox at first, since Maddox was the same way. Caulder was a manufacturer of remote-controlled electronic devices before his retirement, and there might be an angle in that, I suppose; but if so, I just can't see how."

"Anything else, Owen?"

"So far, not a thing, Captain."

Gallagher flexed his shoulder muscles—his back had begun to hurt along with his legs—then glanced into the expensively appointed, plant-festooned lobby. It was deserted now, as was the hallway in both directions; other patrolmen were on duty out front to keep out rubberneckers and reporters, and Hedwig, Oakley, Severin, and Caulder were being detained in the motel lounge for further questioning.

There was nothing to dis-

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tract Gallagher's attention; his mind wandered back and forth over the conversation which he had just overheard and which was being partially replayed in Room 103.

After a time he heard the Captain exhale heavily and say that further speculation seemed pointless and it was time he personally interviewed the suspects. Gallagher straightened up in an attitude of attention as Fabian and Lieutenant Conroy emerged into the hallway.

The Captain flicked eyes over him. "Hold the fort, Gallagher. We'll be back directly."

"Yes, sir." And then, on impulse: "Would it be all right if I stayed inside the room instead of out here in the hall?"

Conroy shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Gallagher watched his two superiors walk down into the lobby, on their way to the lounge, then he turned slowly to enter the empty room.

When Fabian and Conroy returned an hour later, Gallagher was standing patiently by the door, just inside Room 103.

The Captain was saying, "after interrogating the three of them I'm forced to agree that there's not a damned thing to point to any one as the killer. They all have motives, but no apparent opportunity, and while I hate to admit it I can't for the life of me figure out how the murder could have been committed. I've got the feeling one of them is guilty, same as you, Owen—but which one?"

Gallagher said quietly, "Gordon Severin, sir, in Room 105."

Fabian and Conroy stopped abruptly, turned, and Gallagher saw disbelief register on their faces—not so much because of *what* he had said, he thought, as because *he* had said it. But they were looking at him now, really looking at him.

The Captain asked, "What did you say?"

"That Gordon Severin murdered Aaron Maddox, sir."

"How the hell can you make a statement like that?"

Gallagher drew a deep breath and released it slowly, his eyes steady on theirs. "I couldn't help overhearing you and the Lieutenant talking over all the details of the case a while ago, sir, and I got to thinking about some of the things you said. They sort of formed a pattern in my mind, and an idea came to me, and I checked it out while you were gone. It's the right answer, all right."

They kept on staring at him.

"I'm not sure I understand all that business about investment counseling and stock

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fraud," Gallagher said, "but it wouldn't seem that Caulder's accusations triggered the murder. He confronted Severin and Oakley just last night, as you said, and this is a crime that must have been planned some time in advance. It could be Severin had found out on his own what Maddox was doing to O.S.M. clients and to the firm itself, decided to kill him, then maybe try and cover up Maddox's fraud before any of their people found out; too late for that after Caulder came, but not too late to carry out his plan for murdering Maddox. Whatever Severin's motive, I guess it will come out sooner or later."

He paused. "Anyway, the important thing is that Severin is the killer. What proves it is the fact that he's the occupant of Room 105."

"What does Room 105 have to do with it?" Conroy demanded. "How could Severin have gotten from there into here to kill Maddox and then back again?"

"He didn't, sir. He shot Maddox from his room, from Number 105."

The two officials exchanged incredulous glances, as if they thought perhaps Gallagher had gone quietly mad. Fabian said, "For God's sake, man—murdered him through a solid wall?"

"Yes, sir, exactly—through a solid wall. If you'll come over here with me, I can show you how he did it."

He led them across to the built-in wardrobe, glanced into the empty closet, then returned his gaze to Conroy.

"Sir," he said, "you mentioned earlier that you'd found Maddox's sports jacket on the closet floor. Well, that struck me as being pretty odd, because of something else you mentioned—that Maddox, like Caulder, was neat and well-dressed. I'm something of a neat man myself, and neat people would never drop an expensive sports jacket on the *floor* of a closet.

"Also, you said everything in this room was as the maid had left it when she cleaned this morning; and yet there were clothes hangers on the closet floor as well. I asked myself why both the sports jacket *and* the hangers should be there—the only two things out of place. And that's when the idea came to me."

Gallagher reached into the closet and took hold of the wooden clothes rod, which was attached to the wardrobe walls inside wooden ring brackets. The rod was loose, and he was able to jerk free the end in the left-hand bracket. That end, when he brought the rod out within Conroy's and Fabian's

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vision, had a round threaded puncture in it—the kind a small wood tap would make.

Inside the left-hand ring was a neatly drilled hole, slightly larger than the circumference of the rod; through the hole, which penetrated both closet and room walls, they could see the wooden end of another clothes rod—the one in the closet of Room 105.

Captain Fabian said in amazement, "Well, I'm damned. Thorough as the lab crew is, there was just no reason for them to have thought of removing this rod; hell, it's something you look at but never really see in the first place."

Yeah, Gallagher thought, *something you look at but never really see.* He said, "The way it would seem, Severin removed the rod in his own closet, in Room 105, then drilled the hole; he knew from the reservations that Maddox would occupy this room, 103, and he had two days to do the job and to dispose of wood shavings and the brace and bit he'd have used. You said yourself, Lieutenant, that his hobby was making knick-knacks out of wood, so this kind of thing would've been no problem for him. With the rod in his closet back in place, there'd be no indication to the maid that anything was out of the ordinary when she came in to clean.

"Just before Maddox arrived, he must have turned on his shower and wet his hair and got into a bathrobe. He removed his rod again, drove the tap into the end of the rod in 103, then drew it through the hole into his closet. When he did that, the hangers naturally fell off and onto the floor. Severin waited in his closet then, I'd say, peering through the hole; as soon as Maddox came here and rolled back the door to hang up his jacket, Severin inserted the muzzle of the .22 and shot him. Maddox dropped the jacket, staggered back, and fell back across the bed.

"Severin then slid the rod of 103 back through the hole and fit it into place in the brackets, and then unscrewed the tap. He replaced the rod in his closet, opened the sliding door in his room and skidded the murder gun out onto the terrace after first wiping off his prints, turned off the shower, and joined Oakley and Hedwig in this room."

When Gallagher had finished speaking, there was a long, tense, meditative pause. Conroy broke it by saying, "By God, it fits, it all fits."

Fabian said in a grim voice,

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"Let's go get Severin."

Conroy turned to Gallagher and grasped him briefly by the arm. "Man, you've done a fine piece of detective work here."

"See to it you get a Departmental Citation," the Captain said perfunctorily, and he and Conroy crossed to the door. Then, as if in afterthought: "You'd better stay here and keep an eye on things. We'll call you if we need you."

"Yes, sir."

They hurried out, and Gallagher listened to their footsteps retreating along the hall. A Departmental Citation, he thought; a handshake from the Commissioner and maybe his name in the local papers—maybe. But that would be all. No promotion, even if he wasn't already too old for it. His "fine piece of detective work" would be considered a lucky fluke, nothing more, and would be quickly forgotten.

Fabian and Conroy and all the others—this was the worst of it—would continue to look at him without looking at him, without seeing *him;* the words and actions of the Captain and the Lieutenant a moment ago had told him that plainly enough. And in another twelve years there would be a gold watch at his retirement dinner, and a meager Patrolman's Pension, and three months afterward no one would really remember the person whose name was Fred Gallagher. The half-invisible man would have vanished completely.

He started slowly across the room, acutely conscious of the ache in his legs, and looked down at the padded armchair. He looked at it for a long time, then he thought: No, that much is all I've got left to hang onto; I won't let them take my pride too.

Gallagher went out into the hall, closing the door behind him, and stood there waiting stiffly for the return of his superiors.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

As you know from Nick Velvet's 19 previous capers, Nick is a unique crook. He never steals anything of intrinsic value, like jewels or gold or objets d'art. He purloins only the valueless, the worthless. And in this newest caper Nick is hired to steal the absolute ultimate in sheer worthlessness. He is paid a total of $35,000 to heist—believe it or not—a bag of garbage! Now why in the world should anyone in his right mind hire the highest priced thief in the business to pilfer a bag of refuse? Oh, that Nick, the grandest larcenist of our time. . .

THE THEFT OF THE GENERAL'S TRASH

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"Nicky," Gloria said one evening, looking up from her beer, "you never take me anywhere."

Nick Velvet, relaxing in the back yard as he soaked up the mild April weather, asked, "Where do you want to go?"

"Well, you're always traveling *some*place—Paris, London, Florida, California, Las Vegas. And never with me."

"I take you sailing on the Sound."

"But that's in the summer. I want to go somewhere *now*, Nicky."

He sighed and put down his glass. Perhaps she was right. He had been neglecting her. "Where can we go in April?"

She thought about it for a moment. "How about Washington to see the cherry blossoms? We haven't been back there since we first met."

It was true. He'd taken Gloria to Washington for a weekend ten years ago, when they were just getting to know one another. It had been a busy ten years for Nick, but for Gloria the time had brought only a monotonous sameness

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centered around their house and boat. "Sure," he said, making a quick decision. "Let's fly down for a week. We've got nothing to keep us here."

They arrived in Washington on a sunny Monday morning, rented a car at the airport, and drove downtown to one of the newer hotels. Nick guided Gloria to the registration desk through a lobby bristling with diplomats and businessmen. They registered as Mr. and Mrs. Nicholas Velvet, as they had ten years before, and were given a room on the seventh floor.

"The city has changed, Nicky," Gloria said as she stood by the window overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue.

"Some," he admitted. "But the country has also changed in the last ten years."

"Let's go look at the cherry blossoms."

He still felt good with Gloria walking at his side. She had retained the vigor that first attracted him to her, and a decade's time had actually improved the loveliness of her face. He always felt a touch of pride when others turned to look at her as they strolled by.

It was a good day, a reminder of how it had been when they first met. But when they returned to the hotel he was surprised to find a message awaiting him, giving only a phone number to call. "Who knows you're here, Nicky?" Gloria asked. "We didn't tell anyone we were coming."

"I'll see who it is."

While Gloria stepped into the bathroom he sat on the edge of the bed and dialed the number he'd been given. The phone at the other end rang twice and was answered by a gruff-voiced man. "Yes?"

"I was given this number to call."

"Would you be Nick Velvet?"

"That's correct."

The voice relaxed into friendliness. "I'm Sam Simon, the columnist. This is my private line. I have to see you."

"How did you know I was in Washington?"

"My staff checks all hotel arrivals. It's often good for an item."

"I'm no item," Nick said. "I'm on vacation."

"This is business. I want to hire you."

"For what?"

Sam Simon sighed. "I don't think it's wise to be more specific. Not on a telephone. Let's just say it's your specialty. You're a famous guy in some circles, you know."

Nick glanced up at Gloria as she re-entered the room. "All right, I'll meet you."

"My office, tomorrow morn-

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ing at ten. I'm on Virginia Avenue. I'll give you the number."

Nick jotted it down and hung up to face Gloria.

"What was all that, Nicky?"

"Some business. A man who heard I'd checked in offered me a job."

"Nicky, we're here on a vacation!"

"I know. But it just involves running over to Maryland to look at a new plant site. Maybe I could do it in the morning and be back in a few hours. You could take one of those bus tours that stops at the White House and the F.B.I."

"Without you?"

"Then wait for me. It's just tomorrow morning, and I won't be long. I promise."

Sam Simon was a little man with a balding head and sharp, deep-set blue eyes. Nick had read his column on Washington politics occasionally in the New York papers, and had often seen his name mentioned in other news dispatches. Some called him a second Jack Anderson in his ability to ferret out leaks in government departments. He stopped at nothing in what he printed. "It's investigative journalism," he once told a critic. "Hell, if it won the Pulitzer Prize for Anderson it can do the same for me!"

Now he sat behind a desk cluttered with newspapers and books and the latest wire-service dispatches, flanked on his right by a handsome young assistant with long hair and a bushy mustache. "Glad to meet you, Velvet," Sam Simon said abruptly. "Good of you to come. This here's Ronnie Arden, my legman and Number One writer. On days when I'm too lazy to do a column, he takes over for me."

"Glad to meet you both," Nick acknowledged. "But as I told you on the phone I'm here on vacation."

"We want a job done," Sam Simon said, ignoring Nick's resistance. "Your kind of job."

"What kind is that?"

Ronnie Arden answered. "You're a thief, Velvet. Let's quit playing games. You're a thief and we want something stolen."

Nick smiled. "I only steal things of no value. I couldn't take government documents or anything like that."

"Would a bag of garbage be valueless enough for you?" Arden asked.

Nick turned to look at Simon. "Is that it? A bag of garbage?"

"Yes."

"I charge twenty thousand dollars. For that kind of money you could buy a truck and

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collect it yourself."

"There are—well, complications," the columnist admitted.

Nick wasn't surprised. In his business there were always complications. "The garbage is at the Bureau of Engraving?"

"No, no! It's real refuse, of value to no one."

"No one but you."

Sam Simon smiled, "No one but me. Tell him about it, Ronnie."

The mustached man cleared his throat, as if about to deliver a lecture. "The refuse is that of General Norman Spangler, the President's adviser on foreign affairs."

"Military secrets are out of my line."

"No military secrets. I'm sure he has a paper shredder at his office for those. This would be at his home—the apartment where he and his wife live alone. He's on the fourth floor of the Potomac Arms, just a few blocks from Watergate."

It was almost two years since the Watergate scandal first burst on the Washington scene. Careers had been destroyed, men had been imprisoned, some of the highest officials of the government had resigned and been replaced. "I don't want any part of another Watergate," Nick said. "My business doesn't lend itself to testifying before Senate committees."

"This isn't another Watergate," Ronnie Arden said. "You can take our word for it."

"Where does the general dispose of his trash?"

"That's the problem. That's why we need you. Every morning he waits for the mail to arrive. It comes early, around nine, because the building has it picked up at the post office. Spangler checks his mail, leaves his apartment a few minutes later, then drops his daily bag of garbage down the incinerator chute. Then he gets his car and drives to the White House, arriving at his desk by nine thirty."

"Incinerator chute," Nick mused. "I see."

"Naturally he can't know his garbage is being stolen, so you can't hold him up or take it by force."

"Which day do you want it?"

"We don't know exactly. Let's say every day for a week, starting tomorrow."

"That might cost you more than twenty thousand. It would mean more than one theft."

Arden glanced at his boss. "Can we go a little higher?"

"We can go higher if you deliver what we need, Velvet. Twenty should buy us the first two days, at least."

"Agreed." They shook hands and Nick started for the door.

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Then, as a final thought, he turned and asked, "How is security at the Potomac Arms? I'm sure you've checked it out."

"No problem once you get by the doorman. And that shouldn't be difficult for you."

Nick nodded and left.

The problem was with Gloria.

He'd never had her along on a job before, and the idea of sneaking off for two mornings and leaving her alone was something he hadn't reckoned with.

"Where are you off to now?" she asked the following morning as he tried to dress in the darkened hotel room without awakening her.

"More business. I'll be back before ten."

"Nicky, this is supposed to be our vacation!"

"I know. But if I can make a little money at the same time, I should take advantage of it."

She turned over and buried her head in the pillow. He sighed and finished dressing.

It was not yet eight o'clock when he reached the Potomac Arms, a white T-shaped apartment building near the river. He'd scouted it the previous day, making note of the service entrance at the side. He'd already decided there was little chance of getting by the doorman more than once, and tenants' keys were needed for the other entrances.

He'd made certain purchases the previous day and hidden them from Gloria in the trunk compartment of their rented car. There was a pair of white pants with a jacket to match, such as milkmen usually wore. He changed into these in the car and brought out the wire milkman's basket he'd also purchased. He filled this with a dozen cartons of milk he'd picked up on the way over. From past experience he knew that only milkmen and newsboys could gain admittance to these luxury apartment buildings, and he was too old to pass as a newsboy.

He entered through the service entrance, carrying his milk, and immediately came to a locked inner door with a buzzer. He pressed it and waited till the building superintendent made his appearance. "What's this?"

"Milkman," Nick said.

"Where's Eddie?"

"I'm helping him out, learning the route. He'll be along, too."

The superintendent grunted and let him pass. Nick covered the first floor quickly, leaving cartons of milk at random doors. The incinerator room was at the center of the

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building where the wings joined in their T shape. He entered the oversized closet and found a small door set in the wall. It opened directly into the chute. He stuck his head in, hoping no one would choose that moment to drop something from above. The chute was metal, with curved sides, and he could smell the fire below.

He went up on the third floor, checking that incinerator room to make certain it was the same. Then he set to work. The time was 8:30.

Nick was downstairs at nine when General Norman Spangler descended in the elevator to pick up the morning mail. Though he wore civilian clothes, his slim boyish good looks and stiff military bearing were long familiar to television viewers. Like other generals who functioned as White House aides, Spangler was retired from active duty. He'd joined the staff as one of the Secretary of State's assistants and had managed to stay on during the upheavals of the past year.

He smiled at Nick as he passed him in the hall, carrying a handful of mail back into the elevator. Nick took the next elevator to the third floor, checked the incinerator room once more, then used the fire stairs to climb to the next floor. He had taped the third-floor door so he could return that way.

On the fourth floor he opened the fire door just wide enough to see the door to Spangler's apartment down the hall. He had only a few moments to wait. The general emerged carrying a brown paper bag of trash. He paused at the door to kiss a pretty dark-haired woman who seemed twenty years his junior. "I'll be late tonight, dear," he said. "Don't wait dinner."

"So what's new?" She closed the door after him.

Nick let the door close silently and ran down the steps to the floor below. He made it to the incinerator room with just seconds to spare, closing the hall door so no light would shine into the chute in case Spangler looked down before dropping his bundle. He heard the incinerator door open on the floor above, waited an instant, then shoved the wire milk basket into the chute, effectively blocking it a second before the general's trash dropped. The paper bag landed on the basket.

Nick held his breath, waiting to hear any sound from the floor above. But the general had more important tasks to do than listen to his garbage hit bottom. The chute door was already

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closed and he was on his way. Nick gingerly pulled in his prize and set it on the floor of the incinerator room.

There was no time to waste now. He stripped off his white coat and wrapped it around the bag. Carried just right, it looked like a laundry bag. He might have been a tenant going downstairs with his wash, and even the white pants didn't look that odd. The cartons of milk had already been left at doorways. The wire carrying basket he left behind a stack of old newspapers in the third-floor incinerator room. With luck it would be there the following day. If not, it was no great loss. He couldn't risk the milkman ruse two days running anyhow.

Besides, maybe what Sam Simon wanted so badly would turn up in the first batch.

It didn't.

Simon and Ronnie Arden carefully spread out each bit of the general's trash on an office work table, but they were openly disappointed. Two empty beer cans, an empty wine bottle, some frozen food cartons, envelopes, crumpled shopping lists, junk mail—the usual daily accumulation of modern living.

"All right," Simon said, reflecting his disappointment. "We couldn't really expect to score the first day. But it would have been nice."

"You want me to do the same thing tomorrow?"

"The same thing. Let's hope for better luck."

"If you'd tell me what you want, maybe I could get it from his apartment."

"No."

"All right," Nick said with a sigh. "But if nothing turns up tomorrow, we'll have to talk about more money."

That afternoon he took Gloria down the Potomac to Mount Vernon and they basked in the spring warmth as they strolled across the great lawn to the house where Washington had lived.

"Nicky," she asked, "what are you thinking?"

He didn't really know how to answer the question. "Maybe just about how much simpler things were in George Washington's day."

"Things were much simpler just two years ago."

"I know. We live in fast times. Not changing so much as fast, like a rocket headed toward a brick wall."

She took his hand. "Nicky?"

"What?"

"I want you to know I know. About you." She tried a little smile. "I guess I've known for years."

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"How?" That was all he could manage to say.

"Oh, a lot of little things, I guess. All the trips you've taken, and the time you had to get me out of the house because someone was coming to kill you. And the time you were kidnaped for a couple of days. Your explanations don't fool me any more, Nicky. Not after ten years."

"I'm glad you know."

"Will you be going out again in the morning?"

"Yes. For a little while."

She squeezed his hand. "Nicky, be careful."

That evening he took her to the most expensive restaurant he could find, and they talked no more of Nick's work.

The following morning Nick approached the locked side entrance to the Potomac Arms with key in hand. He waited only a minute before a middle-aged lawyer type came out the door swinging his attaché case. The man smiled at him and held the door open. Nick raised his key in salute and walked in. The key was to his hotel room, and he dropped it back in his pocket.

The wire basket was gone, picked up with the rubbish, but Nick didn't really need it. The easiest way was still the best. He watched General Spangler open his apartment door, kiss his young wife goodbye, and walk down the hall with the bag of trash. Nick retreated to the third-floor incinerator room, opened the door to the chute, and stuck his arms in. Seconds later the bag fell into them. As simple as that.

This day Sam Simon was alone in his office when Nick arrived. "Ronnie's off on assignment," the little columnist explained. "These are busy days on the Washington scene. Let's see what we've got today."

The assortment was much like the previous day's haul. Two more beer cans, a milk carton, assorted wrappers and scraps of paper, a few dead flowers, some leftover food in a clear plastic bag, a crumpled letter from a distant relative, envelopes, soggy paper towels.

"Nothing here," Simon remarked gloomily.

"Those apartments all have disposal units in the sink. Maybe he ground it up."

"No, not this."

Nick sighed. "It'll cost you an extra ten thousand for another day. The risks keep increasing."

"That's a lot of money." Sam Simon scratched his head. "You're into me pretty deep already."

"Isn't it worth it?"

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"I guess so, for one more day."

"Want to tell me what we're looking for?"

"When we find it. *If* we find it."

"It's the mail, isn't it? Something he gets in the mail." To Nick there seemed no other reason why he simply couldn't enter the general's apartment and steal whatever it was Simon wanted. "Or rather, something you're expecting him to get in the mail."

"You're smart," Simon conceded.

"But if it's that valuable he wouldn't just throw it away."

"He'd throw away the envelope. That's what we need."

"I see."

"Since you've guessed that much, Velvet, I may as well tell you the rest. It was Ronnie's work, really, that uncovered as much as we already have. Remember Carter Malone?"

"Who doesn't?" Carter Malone had been one of the figures in the Watergate investigation, a man who jumped bail and deserted his family rather than face the prospect of prison. He'd been missing for six months, despite an intensive search by police and press.

"You probably know that a few people have hinted from time to time of White House involvement in his disappearance. I think I'm on the verge of proving it."

"The President?"

"No, not the President, but the one closest to him—General Norman Spangler. Ronnie's information is that Spangler is in direct contact with the missing man. In fact, Malone writes him every week or so. Naturally the letters can't go to the White House, so they're addressed to the general's apartment. That's one reason he waits for the mail each morning before going to work. The letter goes into his pocket, and the envelope goes into the garbage bag which he personally drops into the incinerator."

"The mood this town is in, that information would finish Spangler at the White House. The President would have to fire him."

"Better men have already gone down."

"All right," Nick said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Gloria rolled over in the bed, feeling the sudden movement as he slid out. "What time is it, Nicky?"

"A little before seven."

"Not again this morning!"

"Maybe I'll wind it up today. Then we can take that tour of the White House."

"I hope so."

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He went back to the Potomac Arms, using the same key ruse that had worked so well the previous morning. General Spangler, a man of military habit, picked up his mail exactly at nine and repeated his routine of the first two days. Nick was waiting with outstretched arms to catch the trash bag as it dropped down the chute.

He was just pulling it in when the door of the incinerator room opened. "Oh!" a woman said, startled by his presence.

"I—" Nick straightened, holding the bag of garbage. "The chute seems to be clogged. We'd better call downstairs."

"Clogged?" She was studying his face uncertainly. "Perhaps we can poke it with a broom."

"It's too far down. Let the super worry about it."

"Who are—" He was already pushing past her. "Do you live on this floor?"

"Down the other end," he mumbled.

"Which apartment?"

He ignored her and kept walking. He knew if she investigated the chute for herself she'd see it was clear. As soon as he was out of sight he took the fire stairs at the other end of the building, then went out the side door to his car. It had been a close call. He didn't think he could risk it another day.

But when Sam Simon went through the morning's garbage bag he shook his head sadly. "Nothing here. Not a thing."

Nick pointed to one crumpled envelope, with a California address in the corner. "How about this one?"

"From his brother."

"Shall we give it up?" Nick asked, turning to Ronnie Arden.

Ronnie twisted at his mustache. "We can't—not with thirty grand invested in you already."

"Ronnie's right, Velvet. We have to keep on now, for the rest of the week."

"Tomorrow's Saturday. Spangler's schedule will be different."

Simon shook his head. "He's been working Saturdays lately when the President's in town. He'll leave at the usual time."

"All right," Nick agreed. "Another five thousand."

"Give us a break, Velvet. We've paid you and you haven't delivered yet."

"I've delivered three bags of garbage, which is exactly what you ordered. But I'll give you a break. Let me try one more day and see what I get. If I strike out, it's free. If I come up with

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the envelope, you pay me another five thousand."

"Fair enough," Sam Simon agreed, and they shook hands on it.

On Saturday morning Nick encountered trouble from the beginning He'd had no trouble pausing at the door, his own key in hand, to wait for someone hurrying out to work But this day everyone was staying in or sleeping longer The first one out might well be General Spangler himself, and then it would be too late. Then he remembered the mail pickup and went around to the front of the apartment.

At about ten minutes to nine a car pulled up and a young man yanked two mail sacks from the front seat. "Need a hand with those?" Nick asked.

"Thanks, I've got them."

Nick hurried to open the unlocked front door before the uniformed doorman had a chance. Then, smiling a friendly greeting at the doorman, Nick calmly walked in beside the youth with the mail.

When the sorting began, Nick took the elevator to the third floor. And encountered more trouble.

The woman from the previous morning was standing in front of the incinerator-room door, chatting with a neighbor. If she saw Nick, she'd surely question his presence again.

He pushed the elevator button and descended to the floor below

The incinerator room there was identical with the ones above, but it presented a problem to Nick. He was now two floors below the general He could not watch him leave his apartment, because there would not be enough time to run down two flights of stairs Also, the dropped bag of trash would hit his waiting arms with much greater force, and an especially heavy bag might even escape his grip or split open But he'd have to gamble on General Spangler sticking to his routine, gamble on holding on to the bag as it slid down the chute

At ten minutes after nine he heard one of the upper doors open onto the chute. He braced himself and quickly plunged his arms into the darkness. Almost at once the bag landed safely in his arms. He drew the bag in, hardly breathing. Of course it might have been someone else's trash, not the general's, but the paper bag looked the same and that gave him hope. He suspected many tenants used plastic garbage bags these days. He opened it enough to make sure, saw some empty envelopes on top, addressed to Spangler

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relaxed, and headed for the stairs.

Once in Simon's office, the columnist and his assistant pounced on a coffee-stained envelope. "This is it," the little man said. Nick glanced at the return address. It was a post-office box number in Towers, Delaware.

"I know the place," Arden said. "It's a small town on the shore of Delaware Bay We can be there in ninety minutes "

"Good luck," Nick said, rising to leave: "Do you want to pay me the balance now?"

"You'd better come along," the columnist said "Till we check this out. If Carter Malone is there, you'll get the money "

Nick didn't argue His curiosity had got the better of him. "May I use your phone?" he asked, and then dialed the number of the hotel to tell Gloria he'd be delayed

They went in Ronnie Arden's car, taking the highway across the bay near Annapolis, then continuing east until they reached the coast. Arden's estimate of time had been correct. It was ten minutes after noon when they pulled up a block away from the tiny post office building in Towers.

"I'll park back here," Ronnie said, "in case he shows up for his mail " But when no one came he decided finally, "I'd better go check on who rented that box."

Simon agreed "Flash your press card with a ten-dollar bill under it. I've found it does wonders."

They sat in silence while Arden went down the street to the post office. Finally Nick said, "Nice little town. But why would Malone stay this close to Washington? If I'd jumped bail I'd get as far away as possible "

"He still has contacts in Washington —General Spangler for one And maybe he figures the police won't look for him quite so close to home. He's probably disguised himself, anyway "

Nick decided to drop a small bombshell. "General Spangler certainly has reason to mistrust his wife, doesn't he?"

Sam Simon's mouth fell open. "What do you mean?"

"You and Ronnie knew that was the right envelope even before you examined it. How? Obviously, because it was coffee-stained She's the only one who could have spilled the coffee on it to tip you off "

"Getting smart again, Velvet?"

"Smart? Not really It's obvious Ronnie must have learned about the letters from Malone and the general's routine from his wife And just

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as obvious that Spangler doesn't trust the lady, or he wouldn't wait for the mail every day and empty the rubbish himself before she can see the return address on the envelope."

Ronnie Arden came out of the post office and headed back to the car. He slid into the driver's seat and said, "That was easy The box is rented to a Charles Martin of 122 Bayside Lane."

"Same initials," Simon snorted. "He's not an experienced fugitive."

Bayside Lane was a narrow winding street that hugged the shore of Delaware Bay Its houses more mostly small-cottage types, just old enough to be showing signs of wear and neglect. Number 122 was like the others, with peeling paint on the clapboards and shingles missing on the roof.

"It's a rented car," Arden said, checking the compact in the carport. Sam Simon nodded and rang the bell.

When the second ring brought no answer, Nick moved around to the side door, in the carport. It was unlocked, as he'd expected it would be "This way," he called to the others.

They found the sole occupant of the little cottage slumped in a chair in front of a desk with a portable typewriter open on it. He'd been shot once in the right temple, and a small automatic pistol lay on the carpet near his right hand. In the typewriter was a sheet of paper with the words: I'm tired of running.

The dead man wore a recent growth of beard, but there was no doubt as to his identity "It's Carter Malone, all right," Sam Simon said. "No doubt about it."

"Who would have thought he'd have the guts to kill himself?" Arden mused, half to himself.

Simon was looking around frantically "Isn't there a phone in this place? This is the biggest story of my life!"

"The phone's over by the window," Nick informed him.

Simon bounded toward it.

"But maybe we'd better talk a bit before you call anyone "

"Talk? About what? Your money?" Simon snorted. "Pay him his money, Ronnie "

"It's not the money It's something else."

"What else?" Sam Simon asked.

"Post offices close at noon on Saturday "

"Huh?"

"The post office was closed when Ronnie went to it."

"If it was closed, how in hell could he have gotten this address?"

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"Exactly," Nick said, looking at Ronnie Arden.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" Simon said. "Let's sit down and talk this over."

"I think we'd better," Nick agreed.

But Ronnie Arden remained on his feet. "Are you going to listen to him, Sam? You've got the hottest story of the year right in your lap. Carter Malone, linked to General Spangler, a suicide!"

"Sit down," Nick ordered. "The corpse can wait a few more minutes."

Ronnie Arden grudgingly obeyed. "Do you believe this guy, Sam?"

"He'd better believe me," Nick said. "Because the question immediately comes to mind once you found the post office closed, Ronnie, why did you lie about it? Why was it so important to get us out here *today* so important that you couldn't simply tell us the post office was closed and we could come back Monday? No, it had to be today, with the side door left conveniently unlocked. You knew he was dead, Ronnie, and that raises the question whether it's really a suicide."

"It's a suicide," Arden insisted

"I think you'll have to prove it."

"I "

"You'd better tell me what you know," the columnist said. "Tell me, Ronnie." His voice was deceptively soft.

"He shot himself last night. Mrs. Spangler was with him when it happened."

"I see. And she called you."

"She called me, yes! How do you think I've been getting this information from her? I guess she thought it was great fun to be cheating on her husband with two men—one a fugitive and the other a reporter who was looking for him "

Sam Simon stirred on the edge of his chair. "Ronnie there's no way I can break this story without implicating you."

"Why not? Tell the police you got a tip he was here. You don't have to say where the tip came from."

In a case like this I'd have to go further than that, Ronnie Suicide or not, the papers would be hinting at murder."

Ronnie Arden glanced at Nick and said, "Then let's close up the house and go away Nobody knows we were here except Velvet, and he's not likely to talk."

"What about Mrs. Spangler?"

"She's not about to say anything Before he killed himself, Malone told her he'd written the general that final

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letter, hinting at suicide. But he didn't confess to an affair with Mrs. Spangler. If she admitted knowing about the suicide, she'd have to tell her husband everything—not only about Malone but about me as well."

"At least we know why Malone still stayed close to Washington," Nick observed. "Mrs. Spangler had to remain there and he wanted to be close to her."

"How do we know Mrs Spangler didn't kill him?" Sam Simon asked, gesturing at the body

"She had no reason to! After her affair with me began, she told me about Malone's letters to her husband. She knew it was only a matter of time before we found him and he went off to prison He was no danger to her."

"Why didn't she simply give you his address? Why this whole business of our stealing the envelope?"

Ronnie Arden dropped his eyes. "She didn't want me to know of her affair with him She didn't tell me till last night, when she phoned me in a panic I wanted us to break the suicide story, so I had to pretend I got the address from the post office."

Sam Simon rose to his feet. "There's no reason why this should all come out. I'll cover for you, Ronnie. Your affair with Spangler's wife could only ruin your usefulness to me, if the word got out, and you're too good a man to lose."

But Nick said, "The cover ups keep on, don't they? Just like Watergate."

"This isn't the same thing."

"Isn't it? This may be suicide or it may be murder, but the truth's not going to come out unless all the facts do, unless everyone tells the truth, unless Spangler reveals that letter he got from Malone this morning."

Sam Simon gazed out across the bay. After a moment he said, "Yes, you're right."

"You're going to tell everything?" Arden asked in a panic "I've got a family—"

"Everything," Sam Simon said, and there was more than a trace of sadness in his voice. "Velvet is right. No coverup this time."

Nick left them there waiting for the police. He walked into the center of town and caught a bus back to Washington. He had only one regret about the whole affair—he had collected his last $5,000 before leaving, but he'd never got to meet Mrs. Spangler

Gloria was up early the next morning and was scanning the Sunday paper as they ate

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breakfast in their room. "Did you see all this, Nicky? About Malone killing himself, and General Spangler's wife, and this columnist fellow?"

"I saw it all."

"Washington is an exciting place to visit. There's always something going on."

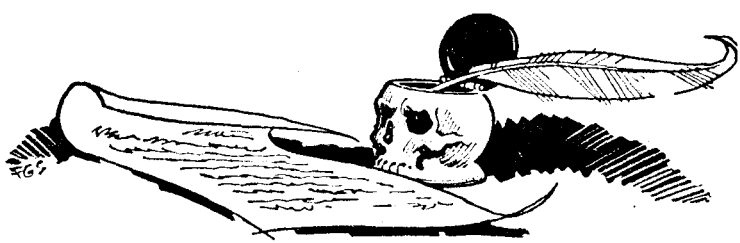
"There certainly was this week," he agreed.

"Did you get your job done, Nicky?"

"All finished. We can spend the whole day together."

"I'm glad. I was worried about you." She smiled across the table. "It's dangerous being a spy, isn't it?"

He reached over and squeezed her hand. She would never change, and that was why he loved her "Well, I'm something like a spy, but not exactly These government assignments—"



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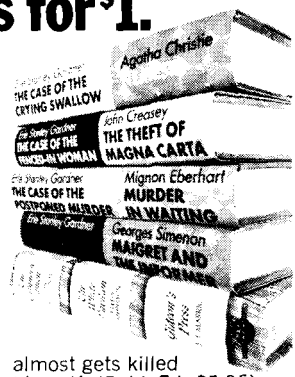

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